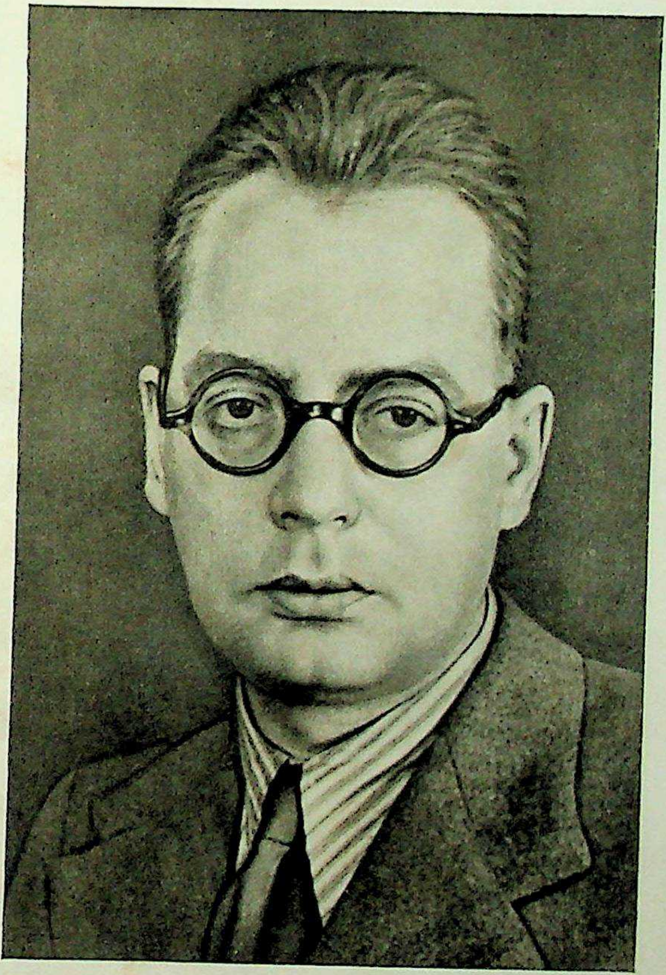
E. KAZAKEVICH

HEART OF A FRIEND

A.K.De

G.M. College of Education
Raipur, Bantalab
Jammu.
Acc. No. 673 (D)
Dated 15.2.10

LIBRARY OF SELECTED SOVIET LITERATURE



Э. КАЗАКЕВИЧ

СЕРДЦЕ ДРУГА

повесть

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
Москва

E. KAZAKEVICH

HEART OF A FRIEND

A Story

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY
R. DIXON

EDITED BY
M. HAMILTON

DESIGNED BY
A. BELYUKIN

CONTENTS

Page

CHAPTER ONE. A SAILOR IN THE ARMY 9
CHAPTER TWO. ANICHKA BELOZYOROVA 32
CHAPTER THREE. FIGHTING RECONNAISSANCE 59
CHAPTER FOUR. LOVE 87
CHAPTER FIVE. THE SEA 122
CHAPTER SIX. SEA AND LAND 148
CHAPTER SEVEN. ASHORE 180
CHAPTER EIGHT. ASHORE (CONCLUDED) 208
CHAPTER NINE. THE LIFE OF THE DEAD 238

CHAPTER ONE

A SAILOR IN THE ARMY

1

THE BATTLE was at its fiercest. The regiment, weakened by repeated attempts to break through the German defences on the approaches to Orsha, heard that it was to be relieved. The men dug in along the miles of gaping muddy ravines were to be replaced by fresh units and would retire to some dry quiet place to rest and cure the chills, colds and sores that the autumn had visited on them.

Major Golovin, the regimental commander, called a conference of his assistants, his chief of staff and the three battalion commanders. Unconcealed satisfaction lit up his features as he broke the news to them.

During the conference two representatives—an elderly colonel and a young major—arrived from the division that was to take over. On entering the damp dug-out, which was lighted only by an improvised lamp, they showed their papers and sat down on the wooden trestle bed near the small iron stove to warm and dry themselves.

During the short ensuing silence, which was broken only by the monotonous howling of the wind and the rattling of the dug-out door, the men observed one another attentively.

The newcomers provided a striking contrast to the regimental officers. The former were clean-shaven and the smell of the hairdresser's still lingered about them. Their faces were fresh and sleek after a long spell of rest and good feeding. Their boots, though lightly splashed with mud and clay, still had the waxy lustre that one associates with army life and comfort.

Golovin felt uneasy at his own uncouth appearance and the unseemly air of his subordinates. "Yes, we've let ourselves slip," he thought, frowning at the stubbly faces of the battalion commanders. "We're like a lot of damned Robinson Crusoes!" But the battalion commanders were by no means ashamed; they looked almost challengingly at the newcomers, as if to say: "We used to be just like you are now; we'll see what you're like in a couple of weeks."

The same thought probably occurred to the young major. In the way he looked at the regimental officers there was sympathy and perhaps a trace of anxiety about what was in store for his regiment on that tough sector of the front. But the grey-headed colonel was obviously an old campaigner and there was a hard glint in his eyes as he growled:

"Why don't you shave! You look just like partisans."

The regimental commander made a forlorn gesture.

"Yes, I suppose we do, Colonel, but frankly, conditions here are impossible. The whole place is desolate. The enemy set fire to everything when they retreated. No trees, no firewood, nothing to warm a bath with. The rain has been lashing down for a month. The dug-outs are caving in and there's nothing to prop them up with. Nothing but mud and water everywhere. Nowhere to clean the weapons. Our machine-guns have been getting jammed. There's been—what hasn't there been!" He seemed to delight in repeating "been" which meant that all his hardships were over and that something different and incomparably better lay ahead.

The colonel frowned with vexation and said curtly: "Let's get down to it."

They told him the situation on the sector, handed him the operational and reconnaissance maps and produced the report on the hand-over, which they had already prepared. But rather to Golovin's disappointment, the colonel turned out to be a meticulous chap and no friend of formality.

"I'll look over the forward area myself and see exactly the situation on the ground," he said. After a short pause he went on: "For the time being, I must say we are by no means satisfied with your information about the enemy, his fire power, defence system, and the strength and composition of his forces. Division has agreed that you must make a fighting reccy before handing over. You'll get an order to that effect within a few hours."

"A fighting reccy?" Golovin repeated, and for an instant his face twitched as if with pain.

A fighting reconnaissance would mean that the regiment, which had already sustained considerable losses, would suffer still more, above all as the enemy had consolidated in positions of vantage and commanded a view of the bare plain for miles on our side, the flooded ravine being our only salvation. Of course the colonel from division was quite justified in insisting on a reconnaissance before taking over. He had every right, even the obligation, to do so. But Golovin thought he was nothing but an unpleasant callous and ill-intentioned old man, who had made up his mind to demand a reconnaissance out of spite for having been given such a difficult sector, and envy of those who were going to rest.

"All right," he said drily, "we'll make a reccy." His eyes wandered over his officers. He had to make up his mind which battalion commander was to be entrusted with that difficult task. Of course, he could give it to Captain Labzin, the commander of the second battalion. Golovin had no special liking for him—he was too cautious, almost cowardly—and he wouldn't feel so much for him as for the other two. But hardly had the thought occurred to him when he dismissed it from his mind, indignant at himself. Whatever the dried-up old colonel thought, whatever his motives were, duty was duty: the unit going was obliged to carry out a reccy before the hand-over if the enemy had not been sufficiently probed—that was a law in war. And the job had to be given to the most determined, his favourite, the first battalion commander.

"Captain Akimov, you get ready," Golovin said with a weary look at him.

"Very good," answered Akimov, straightening his tall figure while a smile spread to his shining black curly beard—a luxuriant growth for no more than a month. His voice, which was deep and had a merry peal, distracted the colonel's attention from the maps and papers. He glanced at the speaker and saw a massive head on a large body, the strength of which even the shapeless padded jacket was unable to hide. Overflowing vigour was what you sensed in Akimov, and if his bearing had been tense and taut it would have appeared boastful, almost ostentatious. That was perhaps why he rounded his shoulders slightly and was awkward and bear-like in his movements, somehow purposely sluggish, and his neck—the only part of him that was bare—though by no means slender, was very white and delicate, reluctant, it seemed, to give away the powerful muscles concealed beneath his clothing.

His face, with the exception of the high, clear brow, was covered with tiny pock-marks, and the narrow grey-green eyes looked calm and self-reliant.

The colonel was impressed by the battalion commander's appearance, but true to his habit of judging people by what they did, or perhaps struggling against the spell of the young man's personality, he plunged into his papers again with the fleeting thought: "We'll see what he's like in action."

"You'll have the support of all our regimental artillery and a battery of the artillery regiment," Golovin said meanwhile to Akimov. "And I'll ask the divisional commander for some extra artillery. I'll give you all we've got. I'll send you the sapper company." He hesitated a second and then added, in a final attempt to sweeten the pill: "And the reccy platoon too."

"All right," was Akimov's answer.

A slight smile still lingered on his features.

"What's he smiling at?" the elderly colonel wondered irritably, looking up at him again.

The reason for Akimov's smile was that as soon as he heard of the fighting reconnaissance he had at once felt sure that Golovin would give him the job. And when it turned out that way, a strange smile lit up his features—a smile of indulged vanity and of amusement at having guessed right, and at the same time of anxiety.

Akimov took his tommy gun down from the wall, and, as the colonel was the senior rank present, he asked him for permission to go.

The colonel nodded and said: "I'll come and see you soon."

"You'll be welcome," Akimov answered. "We found a stray sheep and we're roasting it today. Come and join us. Only I'd like you not to tell my officers you're relieving us tomorrow."

"Why not?" asked the colonel coldly.

Akimov did not answer at first, but at length he said frankly: "So that the men won't spare themselves too much." He waited for any objections there might be, but as no one said anything he went on, not addressing anybody in particular: "I'd be glad to forget about it myself. But it can't be helped."

He lightly swung his tommy gun over his shoulder and went out.

In spite of the relatively early hour it was already quite dark.

From the regimental commander's dug-out, which was cut like a cave into the left slope of the ravine, a narrow tunnel led out into the ravine itself. Akimov held on to the wet walls of the tunnel to avoid slithering in the slush and went slowly forward, trying to get used to the dark. At last he reached the mouth of the tunnel and before him lay the ravine, black and boundless. It was quiet all around except for the wind which was still raging, whistling as it skimmed unrestrained over the puddles and occasionally carrying muffled voices of soldiers.

"Comrade Captain?" called the voice of his orderly, Sergeant Mayboroda.

"Yes, it's me," Akimov answered. "Come on."

He went faster now, for he had got used to the dark. He could even make out the hardly definable line separating the black earth from the dark sky, and the overhanging edge of the ravine not far above him.

"Cold?" he asked the sergeant, who was walking behind him.

"So-so," was the answer.

There was a silence, and then the sergeant called Akimov again: "Comrade Captain!"

"Yes?"

"Did you get it in the neck from the regimental commander?" Mayboroda asked cautiously.

"Why," Akimov returned with a grin, "can you notice it even in the dark?"

The sergeant laughed quietly, but dissatisfied with the evasive answer, he again asked, "Important news, or just the usual?"

"The track goes off upwards round here," Akimov said. "We mustn't miss it. Be careful, Mayboroda. Keep low. See you don't drop your gun in the mud. There we are. Fine. We're out now."

Once on the crest they saw the slow dull flight of a German flare. They went past the place where a knocked-out tank loomed black and strode on over the plain.

"We're going to fight," Akimov said after a long silence. "We'll take Orsha and go on to Warsaw. And then—here's a military secret for you—we'll march on Berlin. That's the news, Sergeant. All there is, and all there can be."

That put an end to Sergeant Mayboroda's loquacity.

They went on in silence to the ravine their battalion was holding. It skirted a village which was marked on the map, but of which only chimney-stacks remained, most of them in ruins. The dark chimneys of burnt-out houses stood in rows like statues of heathen gods. They had the bitter-sweet smell of fire and destruction that it is impossible to forget.

Down in their ravine Akimov and the sergeant went at a quicker pace, for here they knew every inch of the ground. Besides, the rain had become heavier. They passed the battalion mortar sites. In the distance faint shafts of light could be seen from badly closed dug-outs.

A trail of smoke showed where the battalion cookhouse was.

At the entrance to his dug-out Akimov said: "Go and call all the officers."

2

Akimov called his dug-out "down aft"—a term used by sailors wherever the fortunes of war or other service take them. He had been a sailor and had got into the army only by chance after being wounded at Novorossiisk in an engagement on land with a detachment of sailors. He was all the more pleased to be on land because Berlin, as he sometimes said to reassure himself, was too far from the sea for him ever to get there by ship. It must be admitted, however, that his pride was wounded when numerous applications he made to be transferred to the navy were left unanswered, either because they were held up in some office or because the navy needed no more officers.

He had sailed the Black Sea as a lieutenant in command of a submarine chaser, a Class-Four vessel. The cockle of a ship was sunk during an operation.

It is difficult to say exactly what makes sailors so fascinating: whether it is their dangerous and romantic calling, the briny sea breeze which has impressed the land-lubber ever since Homer's *Odyssey*, or whether life at sea teaches them team spirit and fearlessness in face of the most treacherous of all elements; again it may be because you so rarely meet sailors in the vast expanses of Russia. Whatever the reason, the former sailor was adored by his men in the army largely because he was a man of the sea. The soldiers in the first battalion used to boast to their comrades from other units: "Our commander's a sailor. A fine chap he is. You're safe anywhere with him!"

Within a short time Akimov rose to the rank of captain and was appointed company and then battalion commander. This even made him a little anxious in case they transferred him back to the navy; for he was only a lieutenant at sea and his knowledge and experience would not have allowed him to occupy a post corresponding to the rank of lieutenant-commander. The technical side in the navy is increasingly intricate and complex; it is no longer enough to be brave and good at organizing.

All the same Akimov sometimes longed for the sea, especially the Black Sea with its colourful, crowded, humming ports, its dazzling blue sky and its emerald shores. He was homesick for a ship—that wonderfully harmonious organism, that wise little world of its own in which nothing is useless, nothing unreasonable, and whose inhabitants, united in life and in death, form a single whole on a tiny little piece of Soviet Motherland swaying rhythmically under them.

Everything about Akimov was sailorly, even his eyes, which were green with the green of the sea. And the very marks on his face, it seemed, were not from the pox but from the tangy brine.

Pavel Akimov was born in the town of Kovrov, which is so far from the sea that not every bird can fly there. The reason why he was enlisted in the navy was his tall stature—he was well over six feet—and his bodily strength, and because the Young Communist League patronized the navy and tried to send its best lads to it. And Akimov, who was a turner and instrument-maker by trade and had the reputation of being a good social worker, was as near to the navy's ideal as the League leadership all over our vast country could dream of. He had only been to school for seven years when he went to work as an apprentice turner, but as a result of outstanding ability and tenacious work he was soon the best precision-tool operator, and much of his work was on show at exhibitions which were arranged to coincide with Y.C.L. town and regional conferences. Unlike other chaps of his age, he managed all the same to carry out quite a number of Y.C.L. assignments. And to crown it all he took a correspondence course and combined proficiency in studies with all his productive and social work, getting top marks in all subjects. This was all the more difficult as a correspondence course is mostly a matter of will power. The only incitement the correspondence student has to work is his own conscience. It is no easy matter to study without any form of compulsion, even the mildest. Besides, Akimov earned more than any engineer in the works, so it was not to increase his earnings that he studied, but because he wanted to know more and be more useful to his fellow-men. Added to all that, he was the most dutiful son in the numerous family of an old weaver. Naturally enough he was liked by all in the town where he was born and grew up.

The town of Kovrov lies on the steep bank of the River Klyazma and was founded in the twelfth century—so tradition says, at least—by the trapper Epifan. Four centuries later, according to Nestor's Annals, it belonged to the Princes of Kovrov, a branch of the Starodub princely family. It was just like any other uyezd town in Central Russia, having churches, stone-built haberdashers' shops, and quiet straight streets with two-storey houses, the lower storey brick and the upper one wood. Just before the revolution it had thirty-three public houses, a gymnasium, a high school, a hospital, several spinning mills, a tallow factory, a flour mill and the workshops of the Moscow-Nizhni Novgorod railway. The small town expanded after the October Revolution and became large and noisy, full of tall inquisitive youths in whom the blood and build of the generations of trappers and ploughmen who had cultivated the region could be recognized.

From a town of spinners and weavers it grew into a town of metal workers; the railway workshops developed into a large works building powerful excavators that could be seen on all construction sites, large and small, from Moscow to Komsomolsk on the Amur. It was here that Akimov worked.

The Akimov family lived in a small house in Zarechnaya Slobodka, which communicated with the town by means of an old ferry, the bridge across the Klyazma not being built till later. It was on the Klyazma and its tributaries the Uvod and the Nerekhta—cool, sedge-covered rivulets full of whirlpools—that Akimov trained for service at sea, though he was not then aware of the fact. There as a child he learned to swim and dive, there he caught perch in winter with a spoon-bait and in summer bream, pike, pike perch and sometimes sterlet with a line and a large home-made landing net. There he became enchanted by life on the water. In that delightful country furrowed by picturesque gullies, mid clusters of mint and dense hazel-nut thickets, fields of rye, birch groves and sparse pine-woods, meadows and glades dotted with heart's-ease, golden buttercups and lungwort, he learned to understand nature and acquired that intimacy with her which is one of the finest characteristics of the Russian people.

By extraction, therefore, Akimov was "strictly continental," as he himself expressed it, and his eyes—if it is true that the eyes can take the colour of surrounding nature—got their greenness from the pale green hills and winding rivulets of what used to be Vladimir Gubernia.

But for the permanent danger of armed attack on our country he would have devoted all his strength, tenacity and skill to producing things which could be seen and felt, like excavators, railway coaches, refrigerators or motor cars. He would have studied at an institute and either stayed in Kovrov or gone to some other place, perhaps to one of the new towns in Siberia. With his character and frame of mind he would certainly have done his bit with enterprise and keenness to the great benefit of our people. But things did not turn out that way, because the army and navy needed men. He was drafted into the navy with the Voroshilov levy in 1936. After serving as an able seaman and then as a petty officer he went to a naval training school and was finally put in command of a Class-Four vessel. In this capacity he seemed to be of no palpable use to anybody, except that he existed. But just because he existed he kept away from our shores all the possible enemies who had been threatening us for years. And when war started his experience and skill became as necessary to us as the air we breathe and the blood which feeds our heart.

The fact that he came from the navy entitled Captain Akimov to greater regard even in the eyes of Sergeant Mayboroda, his orderly, or messenger, to use the navy term he now favoured. Yet Mayboroda was a quite matter-of-fact and even niggardly sort of man whose pre-war job of refreshment-room manager, on the railway at that, and at Konotop of all places, did not indicate any great gifts of imagination.

Generally speaking, Mayboroda did not believe people could have no defects, and he was inclined to exaggerate their shortcomings. If there are people without defects, he thought, it's only because they're clever enough to hide their seamy sides; just live with them any length of time and you'll find they have their weaknesses.

But he saw none in Captain Akimov, although he had been his orderly for three months, quite an appreciable period in war-time. Not that he really found him flawless, but what failings he had he considered to be absolutely negligible. Akimov was hot-tempered. "Try not to flare up when you're in such a mess!" Mayboroda would say. When the captain happened to be unjustly harsh with his subordinates Mayboroda would say to the other soldiers: "If you're soft-hearted with chaps like ours they'll lead you a fine dance."

Mayboroda's large head with its crooked nose and bloated eyes was always full of unhappy thoughts, for his family was in German-occupied Konotop. He was exemplary in the fulfilment of his exacting duties, but he always looked depressed and bored, as though he was perpetually dissatisfied with something. He liked to grouse and would often interrupt a conversation with a scoffing "So what?" which made many of his comrades furious. On the whole he was not easy to get on with.

Only the presence of Akimov brought about a change in him, as the presence of a girl does in a man who loves her. The captain's unaffected appearance, which, as Mayboroda well knew, concealed a great mind and a considerable knowledge of life, his way of speaking always to the point, his thoughtful smile and his roaring laughter had on the orderly the effect of spurs on a good horse. It prevented him from brooding over himself, his children, his wife, his present and his future, as he had been used to doing all his life.

What he liked most was when there was a lull on the front and Akimov, usually lying down, told him all sorts of stories about sea battles and a sailor's life in general. Mayboroda often questioned him about life in the navy and about the sea, which he himself had never seen.

"It's not easy to describe," Akimov would answer with his thoughtful smile which Mayboroda's face would immediately mirror, perhaps distorting it a little. "Really it's only a lot of water, but not water as a land-lubber like you understands it. It's a world of its own. You can't make a sea out of a lot of rivers any more than you can make a snake out of a lot of worms. The sea is something special. It has its own smell, its own sky, its own light and darkness. From the land it looks black, and the nearer to the horizon you look, the blacker it appears. And white things like lambs gambol over that black mass. But when you look at the sea from a ship, far from the shore, it looks blue." Vexed at not being able to give a proper explanation in so many words, Akimov would invariably end up by saying: "You've got to see for yourself. If we come out of this alive, I'll take you to Sevastopol or Odessa."

3

Akimov's dug-out was famous among all the battalion and company ravines in the sector for its amenities. These were the result of Sergeant Mayboroda's exertions, and all the officers envied Akimov such an orderly.

The floor was paved with bricks which, though blackened by fire, were intact, and straw spread on top of them. The little iron stove was red hot and there was always a good heap of wood drying by it. Granted it was not the decent birch or pine wood Mayboroda longed for, but only willow switches. But then, other dug-outs often did not have even them. Mayboroda gathered them under German fire on the bank of a stream which meandered along the forward area. He used to bring back bundles of them at a time, sometimes crawling on his belly like the Kuban scouts of old. The damp walls were lined with similar switches.

The dug-out contained a table and two benches, and on a nail on the wall was an enamelled basin, dark blue outside and dazzling white inside—as peaceful as a dove. God only knew where that came from. The sleeping bunks were not made out of earth as in other dug-outs—they were real ones made of planks.

There was even a gramophone. At first they had no needle for it, so Mayboroda made one out of an ordinary sewing needle and it did the job no worse than a real one.

They had but four records, all of instrumental music, not songs. This was a great disappointment to the inmates of the dug-out, for they found the music boring and no good at all. Later they got used to them and picked up the expressive, delicate melodies, which slowly but surely penetrated to their hearts. During lulls the men would lie in the wet trenches and sing, alternating favourite songs with the "classical" music, to the great joy of Captain Remizov, a former history teacher, who was Akimov's political assistant.

The dug-out soon filled up. One after the other came the battalion adjutant, Lieutenant Oreshkin, the rifle company commanders Pogosyan and Belsky, the mortar lieutenant and a lieutenant platoon commander—all the surviving battalion officers. The signalman on duty drowsed in his corner by the telephone.

While Akimov slowly took off his wadded jerkin Captain Remizov too arrived. Throwing off his weather-worn ground sheet and wiping his mud-splashed spectacles he asked: "What news?"

"Sit down, comrades," Akimov said as he spread the map out on the table. Without raising his eyes he simply added: "We're going to fight."

He sensed a stiffening among the officers and heard a long rustling as maps were slowly taken out of their cases.

At that moment Mayboroda came back and edged noiselessly along the wall to his place by the stove. He attended to the mutton, but his mind was on Akimov's explanations of the preliminary battle plan, as could be gathered from his occasional desperate sighs. The tempting, almost inebriating smell of roast meat gradually filled the dug-out. Mayboroda was mentally counting how many there were to feed, anxious to give every one his share and at the same time not to overdo it, so that there would be some left for the next day. "There'll not be so many tomorrow," he thought, ruefully shaking his head.

The attack was fixed for eight o'clock next morning. The Germans would then be having their breakfast and there would be fewer men in the trenches. There was to be a twenty minutes' artillery barrage to soften them up. The plan was to capture the first German trench and consolidate in it. The regimental sappers were to be attached to the battalion for the operation. Further details would be settled when orders came from regiment.

"Any questions?" Akimov asked after a silence.

There was no answer.

"Is it clear what the objective is?" he again asked, frowning.

"Quite," said one of the officers in a low voice.

"We'll have substantial artillery support," Akimov went on. "The whole of regimental and divisional artillery will be helping us."

He was silent again and then his face suddenly reddened and he gave vent to his feelings in a passionate shout: "This is a thing for the battalion to be proud of, not to sit moping over! You've not got enough men, you say. You're tired? I know all that. So does the div commander. And perhaps the front commander too! Do you understand?"

He raised his eyes and looked at them for the first time, becoming still more irritated, his face growing harder and bitter.

"It makes me ashamed when I see officers like you!" he burst out at last. "You could at least take your horse-cloths off!" He needed some object for his anger and the pity he felt for his weary comrades whom he was obliged to prod on still more to brace them for the fight ahead. It goaded and irritated him all the more as this was to be their last action there that awful autumn, and they did not know it, and he did not think he had the right to tell them. When in response to the unjust and insulting outburst they silently took off their ground sheets, he immediately cooled down and was on the point of telling them the truth out of sheer pity. But he only made a forlorn gesture, sighed wearily and then shouted to Mayboroda, "Orderly, bring the mutton and vodka!"

4

Remizov was the only one who refused to partake of the meal. He never drank vodka and ate very little, giving half of his ration to Pogosyan, who, though he ate more than all the others, was as thin as a lath and always hungry. Even the war did not overcome Remizov's distaste for vodka, although it brought out in him qualities which he himself had not been aware of and which quite amazed him sometimes; for example, a physical endurance and untiring energy which, sickly and for ever out of sorts as he was, he had never suspected himself of possessing.

Akimov was frankly surprised at Remizov's endurance and sometimes thought he would last as long as the war, and on the day and at the hour it ended he would collapse all of a sudden like a sheaf of corn, his large deep-set short-sighted eyes still gazing up at the sky as they were now fixed on some point in space as though he were either pondering over something or perhaps just relaxing.

Suddenly Remizov stood up and said in his usual low voice: "Well chaps, carry on with your meal. I'll be going. I must call party meetings in the companies and get the men ready for the battle. Tomorrow's September 24th, exactly 154 years since the battle of Rymnik at which Alexander Vasilyevich Suvorov routed the Turkish army. Let's try to give the Germans a blow like that, even if only a quarter as hard. I hope you won't be offended, Pavel, at my not crediting you with more than a quarter of Suvorov's talent."

"Even that's too much," Akimov joked gloomily, "but he didn't have a political assistant like the one I've got."

"Very good, my friends," observed Remizov, and his tone reminded everybody that he was a school teacher.

As he went out Akimov shouted after him: "See that the men have supper in time and turn in earlier today."

The mutton had hardly been done justice to when an officer arrived from regimental headquarters with a written detailed order about the fighting reconnaissance. He was followed by Firsov, the engineer from regiment, Gusarov, the artillery commander, and Captain Drozd, the reconnaissance officer. A little later the elderly colonel from the division that was taking over came back.

Nobody but Akimov knew who the colonel was, and everybody took his arrival as a matter of course, thinking he was some new senior staff officer from division or corps headquarters. But Akimov became flustered and looked intently at the colonel as though trying to read in his eyes whether he remembered their agreement. The colonel nodded, so Akimov, not wishing to show how irritated and rattled he was, forced a smile as he inquired: "Well, how do you like it here down aft, Comrade Colonel?"

"Are you referring to your battalion command post?" the colonel asked with an inscrutable expression.

"Exactly."

"It's not bad."

"It's all the work of my orderly," Akimov went on, affecting not to notice the colonel's reproach for the non-regulation term he had used. "He's a great chap for making a place comfortable."

Captain Drozd announced that the reccy men were coming with a female interpreter. The regimental commander had ordered her to stay with Akimov in order to be able to interrogate any prisoners taken as soon as they were brought in.

Akimov frowned; he did not like the idea of a girl being in his dug-out, knowing too well his habit of using strong language during battle.

"The regimental commander ordered that she was not to be allowed away from here," Drozd continued. "Otherwise she has a liking for going forward with the reccy party."

"Let her go if she likes," Akimov replied rather rudely. "I've got other things to do than to look after a girl."

Akimov had already heard a lot of the new interpreter. In the ten days she had been with the regiment she had managed to make something of a name for herself, and even seasoned reccy soldiers who were not so easily impressed spoke of her bravery. During the last few days, for example, there had been talk of how she had crept out into no-man's land in front of the second battalion positions three nights running and hidden in the reeds to listen to what was going on in the enemy's lines. From what the German soldiers said and different noises she heard, it was said, she had been able to conclude that a fresh battalion had been brought up to defensive positions on the regiment's left flank.

Frankly speaking, Akimov took a dislike to her at once, even before he saw her. Being himself exceptionally brave and ingenious in tricking the enemy, it made him envious to hear tales of anybody else's bravery. His pride made him so touchy that talk like that always seemed a reproach to him for not being able to do the same thing. What hurt him still more this time was that the talk was all about a girl.

Anyhow he had no time for her now. Every minute seemed to add to the strain; the door of the dug-out hardly remained closed for a moment, and the ground sheet curtaining it off seemed to flap incessantly as new actors in the morrow's drama went in and out. Akimov was so busy giving all sorts of orders, fixing targets with the gunners, giving the sappers the location of our own and the enemy's mine fields and barbed-wire entanglements, and making plans with his officers for all imaginable contingencies, that he sometimes forgot about what was to follow the battle, their withdrawal to the rear. When he did remember it he would remain silent for an instant, the blood would pound in his veins and he would give the colonel a sidelong glance in which there seemed to be some superstitious doubt that he was really sitting there at all. No matter what dislike he had for him, his presence meant beyond a doubt that they were being relieved next day. But just suppose he turned round and saw no colonel there? Suppose it was just his fancy, a dream of his fevered brain? But the colonel really was sitting there, a real colonel in flesh and blood and full of the gall of zeal for regulations.

Amid the hum of subdued conversations, the rising and waning whistle of the wind and the sharp crack of the opening and shutting of the door, a noise was suddenly heard in the dug-out like the hiss of boiling milk; then came a loud pleasant melody: Mayboroda had wound up the gramophone.

"What's the meaning of that?" the colonel asked with a start. "Stop it. This isn't the time for that sort of thing!"

Akimov, who was giving the artillery officers their targets for the battle, kept his pencil poised over the map on which he had been marking something, and, looking the colonel straight in the eyes, he calmly retorted:

"I told him to. Leave him alone. The Germans are used to it. If we don't play music in the evening they might smell a rat. It's a military necessity, Comrade Colonel."

"Try and find fault with that devil!" the colonel thought with a respectful glance at Akimov's head, which was now bent over the table. As he watched the preparations for the operation, the colonel could not help noticing the calm, unconstrained attitude of the young commander,

CC-0 Agamnigam Digital Preservation Foundation,Chandigarh.Funding by IKS-MoE-2025-Grant

who managed people with the assurance that comes from the habit of authority and personal fearlessness.

"The German mortar battery's just here," Akimov resumed, jabbing with his pencil at a spot on the map. "Pound that for me and I'll be on top of the world."

The phone buzzed, the operator took up the receiver and immediately passed it on to Akimov, saying: "The regimental commander."

Akimov spoke to Golovin, or rather listened in silence to what the major had to tell him, occasionally muttering: "That's clear." "Yes." "Very good." "Right you are." At the end his face suddenly flushed, and he exclaimed: "What a nuisance, Comrade Major! That interpreter again! Take the girl off my hands, for God's sake! Yes. All right. Very good."

He swore as he laid down the receiver and turned to Captain Drozd with a gesture of annoyance.

"They're all worried about that interpreter of yours," he said. Then a spiteful thought occurred to him, and he added: "Probably someone up at the top is interested in her. Why doesn't he keep her with him then!"

"I wouldn't know," was Drozd's guarded answer. "It's no business of mine."

A small thick-set warrant officer came in and reported that the ammunition supplies had arrived. Water was streaming down his greatcoat. Others came with all kinds of reports and requests.

"Everything's quite in order," the old colonel thought. He rose: "I must go. I'll have a look at the forward area."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Akimov asked, also rising.

"Get on with your job. Send someone else with me."

Lieutenant Oreshkin, a pretty, pink-faced officer of slender build, understood Akimov's nod, picked up his tommy gun and followed the colonel.

In the ravine a violent wind immediately bore down on them as though rejoicing that it had new victims, and lashed their faces with cold rain.

"We'll start on the right," the colonel said.

They went along the ravine where, in spite of the impenetrable darkness, continual movement could be sensed. Dark shadows were gliding in all directions. Carts creaked as they jolted over the shell-pocked earth. Here and there the red lights of cigarettes glowed in clusters like stars. The ravine wound now to the left, now to the right, the wind accordingly abating or redoubling its fury.

Leaving the ravine, the colonel and the lieutenant went along a shallow communication trench. German flares slowly rose and glided to the ground, shedding a cold green light on the maze of dark, flooded passages, tracks and trenches which criss-crossed the area and the steel-like ribbon of the brook with its overgrowth of sedge shivering in the cold. From the battalion commander's dug-out you could still hear the melancholy strains of a concerto.

"Have you been long with Akimov?" the colonel enquired.

"Six months," came the ready answer from the young lieutenant in front of him. "I used to be a platoon commander and then Akimov transferred me to the battalion command post."

"Is he a good commander?"

"I should say so!" The answer was enthusiastic. "The best in the division. By the way, he's a sailor."

Tracer bullets whizzed over their heads.

"This is a dangerous place," the lieutenant said. "The trench is not finished. We'll have to go about fifty yards over open ground."

"The hand-over report shows a continuous trench," the colonel muttered.

They crept almost on hands and knees over the dangerous stretch and then sprang into the trench, sending up a fountain of water. Here they were challenged. Two gunners were standing by a camouflaged machine-gun. Further on was a large group of soldiers out of which came a soft friendly voice.

"So there you are, boys. That's what history tells us about just and unjust wars. That's our Party's attitude to war in general and to the present Great Patriotic War in particular. Yes, it's hard for us. We've left behind us our families and the job to which we had devoted our lives. We're peaceful people, but we're merciless in battle and we fight to the last. Because we're fighting for the freedom and independence of our Motherland and, when all's said and done, for the future of mankind, the happiness of the enslaved peoples in Poland and Czechoslovakia, France and Belgium, Denmark and Norway."

These words, pronounced in the darkness of that rainy night, were ordinary enough in themselves and could have been heard from the lips of any political worker in the army. But the tone in which they were pronounced and the calm clearness that flowed with that low voice penetrated to one's very soul.

The voice faded gradually in the distance.

"Who's that?" the colonel asked.

"Captain Remizov, our political assistant," the lieutenant answered. "The best in the regiment. By the way, he's a teacher."

"All your fellows are the best," the colonel grinned in the dark. He would have liked to say something encouraging to the young lieutenant, to tell him that the next day his battalion and others would leave that difficult, rain-sodden sector far behind. But he remembered his promise to Akimov and said nothing.

CHAPTER TWO

ANICHKA BELOZYOROVA

1

WHEN THE colonel left, Akimov had a talk with his signalmen. He suggested that they should set up a wireless net first thing in the morning in case the enemy put the telephone out of action. Then the artillery observers came, and he sent them out to the companies so that they would be able to correct the fire of their batteries from the very forward area.

Tea was brewing on the iron stove. Some of the officers had made themselves as comfortable as they could on the straw and were drowsing. Mayboroda put on a new record. Now and then the phone rang. Akimov was discussing with the regimental engineer where passages through the mine fields should be made. Suddenly from outside came the loud silvery peal of girl's laughter. Everybody looked up. There was another peal, this time close at hand. The door opened, the ground sheet was raised, and a girl appeared on the threshold, laughing.

"Oh, it's just too funny!" she exclaimed, brushing the rain off her laughing face with her greatcoat sleeve. She stood still for a moment, gazing unabashed at the men in the dug-out, and then said: "I should never have expected music like that here!" Going up to the gramophone, she suddenly became serious and thoughtful, and when the record was over she murmured: "Anitra's Dance, by Grieg. So there are classical music enthusiasts here."

Only then did she say a word of greeting:

"How do you do? Who's in command here?"

"I am," answered Akimov, turning his massive head towards her with affected coolness.

The girl obviously sensed unfriendliness in his answer, for her eyes flashed, but she introduced herself in the usual way: "Army interpreter Lieutenant Belozyorova."

Akimov turned back to the engineer without answering her. The girl went up to Drozd and said, "The reccy men have come." Then she squatted down by the fire.

The slight embarrassment that could be felt since her entrance was dispelled. Akimov went on settling with the engineer what places were to be de-mined, only a little louder than before. The officers who had so far been half asleep on the straw did not get up, but their sleepiness seemed to have been blown away. When the girl had warmed her hands, she said in a low voice in Mayboroda's ear: "Play that again, will you, there's a good fellow."

Mayboroda nodded and wound up his musical box. Once more the famous Norwegian composer's graceful melody filled the room with its charm.

Busy as they all seemed with their own affairs, everybody was observing the girl. The fine oval of her young face, her big brown eyes under the shade of their exceptionally long lashes, without which they might have seemed almost impertinent in the radiancy of their unfathomable youth and lust for life, her prominent chin which added an expression of daring to her proud womanly face, her top boots, tiny in comparison with those of the others in the dug-out—everything about her seemed to enthral the men around her, if only for the reason that they had not seen a woman for such a long time.

As for Captain Akimov, his indifference was mere show. In reality he immediately forgot that a few minutes ago he had complained about hearing nothing but interpreter here and interpreter there from everybody. He even wondered why he had not heard more about her. Something snapped inside him when he saw the girl. He seemed to feel at once that, whoever she was and whatever her name, that girl who burst in with a peal of laughter out of the dark boundless autumnal world was the one he had always dreamed of. The whole world, including the dug-out, the endless gullies, the shattered villages and the watery plains ploughed up by sappers' spades now appeared to him in a new light, in different colours and in a completely unknown perspective as in a fairy-tale. Or perhaps he himself had changed his previous state of mind and even his previous physical condition for a hitherto unknown one full of light, like a mountain climber who, having scaled the highest peak, emerges in a rarefied atmosphere where it is at once easier and yet more difficult to breathe.

The upheaval which in a single minute took place in him—no longer an eighteen-year-old but a man nearly thirty with knowledge of life and experience of women—impressed him as being not only silly and out of place but fraught with mortal danger. He was in the habit of controlling the expression of his face and the emotions of his heart. Feeling now that he might come under the influence of some power outside himself, against which his strength would fail, he decided to be pitiless in his rebuff. And the first thing to do was to harden himself, cost what it might.

Thus resolved, he returned to the previous assumption that the girl must have some high-placed protector or, to put it simply, a lover with rank and influence enough to compel even the regimental commander to take care of her. "Who can it be?" he thought, trying to conjure up scorn, though well aware that he neither despised the man nor even wanted to know who he was.

He went on to conclude that she was attractive and charming only because she was alone among so many men; that her attraction was but that of woman in general, the instinctive lure of a woman's body. Had he met her in the street in Odessa or Sevastopol, he reasoned, he would probably not have looked twice at her, for, no longer alone, but just one among many, she would be no better than the others, perhaps not even so good.

Besides, she was bending down to Mayboroda and whispering in his ear. So she was probably used to male society and was ready to be nice to anyone.

For another thing, when she came in she had said: "It's just too funny," which was by no means proof of refinement but rather reminded one of seaport coquettes. Strangely enough this particularly galled, or, perhaps on the contrary, was particularly comforting to him, because, though a man of the people himself, he had managed to read a lot of books, to study and learn much, and cultural backwardness in young people under the Soviet government, which so lavishly encourages learning, rightly seemed to him a sign of lack of discipline, laziness and utter worthlessness.

And then, by all appearances she was not a clever girl. What was she laughing at? Why should music evoke such a strange and base reaction in her?

3*

These and other ramparts Akimov threw up around his heart.

Meanwhile, life went on with all its tenseness and complication. H-hour was relentlessly approaching. New questions kept cropping up. Akimov observed himself and listened to his own voice like a stranger while he gave orders and asked for advice as calmly as ever; he saw himself thinking over some serious matter for a while and then coming to a decision with his usual clarity and informing the others of it with the same perfect calm; he observed himself rising, going to the phone and talking to the commander of the regiment, his adjutant, or the divisional artillery commander on all sorts of vitally important details.

Akimov did everything just as usual and yet he kept an eye on what was going on around the girl. He noted that the gunner officers, with whom he had completed his arrangements, were still there chatting with her, their faces showing the unnatural expression that men always have in the presence of a beautiful woman; that Captain Drozd, who was always noisy and unconstrained, seemed quite shy when he was near the interpreter; that even Firsov, the engineer, though he was getting on in years, was saying nice things to her, and that Mayboroda, who had the reputation of a skinflint, was treating her to roast mutton.

What annoyed Akimov more than anything else was the behaviour of Captain Remizov, who had come in from the companies. He of all, who carried a photograph of his wife, Maria Alexeyevna, in his left breast pocket with his Party membership card and whom the officers nicknamed "the Monk," should have behaved with more reserve. But even he was charmed by the new interpreter and did nothing to hide the fact. Out of the corner of his eye Akimov watched Remizov smiling stupidly (as he thought), showing the girl his wife's photograph and then giving her three lumps of sugar, while she sipped her hot weak tea, laughing all the time. The result was that Remizov had no sugar left at all, and this somehow made Akimov particularly wild.

"She could have the decency to refuse," he thought, with a killing look at Remizov.

At length he was so sick of all the fuss that was being made over the "young lady" that he rose and almost shouted: "Enough of this. Go to your units."

The artillery officers rose and went reluctantly. The signalmen hesitated at first, spoke to Akimov for another few minutes about liaison and then left too.

"You can all fix yourselves up where you please," Akimov said to those remaining, as he put on his wadded jerkin. Then he said to Mayboroda: "I'm going to the companies."

Just then the Germans started a routine shelling. It did not last long and ended as suddenly as it had started. It was the sort of thing they were used to, but Akimov caught himself fearing the dug-out would be hit.

No sooner was the shelling over than the door flew open and the colonel and Oreshkin entered, or rather tumbled in.

"A mortar bomb only just missed us," said the colonel. He now looked excited and much younger. His former smartness was gone: he was covered with mud and clay from head to foot.

Looking up, he saw the girl and gave an exclamation of surprise: "Anichka! How did you get here?"

The girl peered at him and, beaming with joy, threw her arms round his neck and cried: "Semyon Fomich, you dear! What are you doing here?"

"I'll tell you later on, just be patient," the colonel mumbled, flushing deeply as he glanced sideways at the officers. "Are you at the front? Here? Where's your Pa?"

That word "Pa," pronounced in the dug-out before a battle by the stern, grim-faced colonel, sounded incredibly out of place and sentimental. It made all those men, bound by nothing but the service and the common task, see one another in a different light: as human beings who had fathers, mothers, grandmothers and other relations, somewhere far, far away.

As he left, Akimov looked at the colonel with sympathy for the first time and even thought that he had perhaps been mistaken in his opinion of him—that the old man was probably quite a decent warm-hearted fellow. And the fact that the girl had a father—quite a natural thing, after all—also struck him somehow as very pleasant and important, as though it cleared her of the evil he had thought of her before. So, instead of being vexed over this circumstance, Akimov was compelled to feel glad about it.

2

The reason why Anichka Belozyorova laughed as she entered the dug-out was this. When in the ravine with the reccy men she had heard music, first in the distance and then getting nearer and nearer, and the tune seemed familiar to her and reminded her of before the war, of Moscow, her music lessons and everything else associated with peace-time. The nearer she came to the music, the brighter her spirits grew. She stopped and listened and could not help wondering aloud: "Who's that playing?"

Suddenly out of the inky darkness came the calm, authoritative voice of a soldier: "They're playing Anyuta's dance. In our battalion commander's dug-out."

Then Anichka recognized Anitra's Dance by Grieg, and again she laughed heartily at the Russianized name the soldier had given it. All the rest of the way to the dug-out she was shaken with bubbling laughter which seemed out of place in that stern landscape of war and the tense silence preceding the battle.

The meeting with Colonel Verstovsky, an old friend of her father's who had married a distant relation of their family, raised her emotion to a peak. Combined with Grieg's music it evoked a vivid memory of the world which until recently had seemed to her so paltry, limited and even a trifle vulgar, but which, now that she was at the front, did not seem so bad after all.

Anichka's short account of recent events, and in particular of her disagreement with her father, brought reproaches and sighs of distress from Semyon Fomich.

Anichka's father, Alexander Modestovich Belozyorov, was a doctor of repute, a lieutenant-general in the Medical Corps. Since 1941 he had been chief surgeon in one of the armies in the South. Anichka had been alone in Moscow, her mother having died long before.

She was a second-year student in the German department of a foreign languages institute. Everybody in the institute, including the teachers and professors, had dug trenches and anti-tank ditches around Moscow and had then been evacuated to the East in October, Anichka being directed to a large town on the Volga. There she grew melancholy, for it seemed to her that it was useless and even a disgrace for her to stay on at the institute. She knew German better than all her fellow students as it was, for her mother, who had studied medicine at Zurich University, had taught her it in her childhood, bringing her up with the strictness and tenacity of a good mother. Anichka therefore spoke German fluently and surprised even experts by her pronunciation.

Anichka came literally to hate the institute. She was by that time fully aware that she had entered it only because she already knew German and was too lazy and undisciplined to study seriously. She now saw how rightly her father had opposed her entering the institute, which he scornfully called "a refuge for premature young ladies looking for husbands." He wanted his only daughter to become a doctor. She, however, had stuck to her idea and was now tortured with self-reproach.

When the war began she felt a real loathing for the language of the invaders. The terrible misfortunes which fell upon millions of people showed her clearly for the first time where her duty lay. She decided that the place for her was where hardships were greater. These considerations made the humdrum life of the students seem trivial and filled her with revulsion for those of her companions who were still taken up—though less than formerly—with dresses and young men and went into raptures over the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke and Anna Akhmatova. In her passionate longing to do her bit for the common cause Anichka naturally exaggerated her own shortcomings and those of others, but this was to be expected and it bore its fruit.

She shuddered at the sight of the crowds of distracted évacuées who had been driven away from their native towns and villages by the Germans. Hospital trains would bring wounded soldiers to the quiet town, and, seeing their sufferings, Anichka chafed at her powerlessness to help them.

She went to the director and asked for a year's leave of absence, not concealing her desire to go to Moscow and from there to the front. What she wanted was to go behind the German lines like some girls she had read of in the papers, to carry out sabotage and send information on the enemy by wireless or other appropriate means.

The director categorically refused, either out of purely formal considerations or because he did not want to let a young inexperienced girl, the only daughter of a famous surgeon, go to war. Anichka immediately concluded that he was stupid and inhuman and decided to go without permission.

The only one she told of her design was a friend of hers, Tanya Novikova. Tanya was greatly excited and agreed to go with her. They wandered about the town for a whole day, stood for a long time on the bleak bank of the ice-bound Volga, said a lot of very lovely but sincere things, and solemnly swore always to be honest and just.

But they found that it was no simple matter to return to Moscow without permission. The capital was still in the fighting area, and a journey there had to be sponsored by some organization and involved great difficulties and numerous formalities.

Tanya was terrified of being taken off the train like a criminal and sent back to the institute in disgrace. So Anichka decided to go alone.

Tickets to Moscow were sold only to those who had a pass, so she boarded a train without one. She found herself a seat on a big trunk in a carriage already packed with travellers and baggage. At the beginning she felt very uneasy. The people around her seemed noisy and ill-natured. No one thought of anything else but getting a good seat, and Anichka was greatly shocked at this. But once the train drew out of the station her travelling companions turned out to be quite nice people. They looked enquiringly at one another, made acquaintance of one another and showed themselves kind and friendly. The noise and quarrels calmed down, everybody managed to make himself tolerably comfortable and good comradeship was established.

At first Anichka was afraid there might be an identity check, but she reassured herself with the thought that her father was a general and that she had a certificate to that effect. But what put her at her ease more than anything else was the thought that as soon as she said why she was going to Moscow they would not make any difficulty about it. With this conviction she continued her journey calmly. Her large eyes went from one traveller to another, her youth evoking in them all a feeling of pleasure and sympathy which she was only just beginning to suspect.

She spent the first day of her journey in the vague but powerful consciousness of her charm and innocence, sensing that there is no greater force than inward conviction.

But then something happened which was bound to happen sooner or later. The door of the carriage opened and the conductor shouted, "Show your papers."

She raised cool frank eyes to the soldiers who carried out the check. Strange to say, they asked to see everybody's papers but hers. But it was not because they had not noticed her. They had noticed her all right, but perhaps they thought a girl of her age would not be travelling without her father or mother. One of them even smiled at her, and, as he did so, his large brick-coloured face was covered with a network of deep but kindly wrinkles. She returned his smile, but was afterwards vexed with herself for doing so, for, being in a state of perfect self-control, she was aware that she had done so only to dispose him in her favour and forestall the question about her papers that he had on the tip of his tongue.

She decided that she had behaved wrongly and ran after the soldiers, who by this time were leaving the carriage, and told them that she had no pass to go to Moscow but absolutely needed to go there. The thumping of the wheels prevented them from hearing what she said, and she repeated it. Then the man with the brick-coloured face looked at her in surprise and, seeing the girl with the red knitted cap and scarf to match, he seemed to remember her. "We've already checked in your compartment," he said, puzzled and apparently even angry. Then they disappeared into the next carriage and Anichka went back to her place, embarrassed but glad, not understanding why it had turned out that way. She concluded, not without grounds, that her looks alone inspired confidence, and she felt full of gratitude towards people. And she in her simplicity had been afraid that, having no pass, she would be taken for a spy. Had she been able to see herself as others did, she would have laughed at her fears.

Absorbed in her thoughts and uncommunicative as people always are when they have taken some serious decision, Anichka gazed abstractedly around. Everything she saw seemed to be far away but nevertheless roused pleasant feelings in her: the coarse sounds of a single keyboard accordion, the strong smell of *makhorka*, and even the most insignificant words of the homely people in the carriage seemed to her full of some profound meaning. Her travelling companions, sensitive, perhaps, to the inner fire burning her, were friendly towards her, took pleasure in conversation with her and told her of their lives, their work and the great harm that the war had directly or indirectly caused each one of them.

Most attentive of all towards her was a lanky lieutenant whom everybody in the carriage called Vitya. He had already been to the front and been wounded. Now he was on his way back there from hospital. He was wearing the Valour Medal, and as awards were few in those early days of the war, Anichka felt a great respect for that noisy and jolly young man. He could not help noticing the way she stared at him, and, attributing it to quite a different cause, he began to pay her his addresses, shared his meal with her, brought her boiling water and generally was most obliging.

He got her a place next to him in the top bunk, where it was warmer and she would be less disturbed. When it got dark she felt the lieutenant draw close to her, put his arms round her and his hands on her body. She lay still as death. Then the lieutenant became bolder. Anichka was dumbfounded. She just could not understand how he could behave in such a way when a war was raging and there was so much suffering everywhere and so many other things to think of. She got down and sat in her former place, on somebody's trunk in the corridor. The lieutenant was offended and sat alone for a long time in silence. But soon he could hold out no longer and he too got down. He found himself a seat beside Anichka and angrily asked why she had got out of the bunk. Then he started talking about there being a war on and so much suffering everywhere; he might be killed in a few days—could she really be so hard-hearted? She did not answer—her thoughts were far away. She felt as if she were not in a train but all by herself in a desert. Meanwhile, smoke was rising in thick, slightly reddish clouds. Those clouds of smoke, she thought, were like the vague complaints with which the lieutenant was trying to move her.

He went on talking in the same strain until at last she told him she did not love him. A ridiculous thing to say, she thought; he must have known that himself.

All the same, he left her in peace and climbed up into his bunk again while Anichka remained sitting in the corridor. Then she heard several voices at the same time offering her a better place and somebody even offered to let her lie in the second bunk. She refused all these offers. The lieutenant then got down and asked her to resume her place, where she would be warmer and more comfortable. As Anichka refused, he said he would remain where he was, she need not be afraid. His voice rang true: there seemed to be no doubt that he wanted to make amends. She climbed into the bunk and he stayed down below. They came to a station and he went for a stroll. When he returned, he asked her to allow him to sit beside her. "All right," she said, touched by his submission. He was in fact quite sincere and really regretted his silly behaviour. But once beside her he could not control himself and began to put his arm round her again, this time more cautiously, as though unintentionally. "Have you no more will than that?" she said crossly, and though the words were not insulting in themselves they were so straightforward and heartfelt in their severity that they had the desired effect and cooled the young lieutenant's ardour better than any long talking-to or noisy scene. He pouted in a ridiculous way and did not touch her any more. To show her gratitude she gave him a kind pat on the shoulder, but he took this for encouragement and started all over again. Thereupon Anichka got down for good, flatly refusing to sit beside him again.

She went to the window and looked out into the murky frosty night. She could feel the cold through the window. A baby was crying somewhere in the carriage. Suddenly it occurred to Anichka that life would be hard on her, that life was hard generally. That life was much easier for men than for women, and that was why women so often disguised themselves as men in plays and novels of old. Although the travelling incident she had just experienced was but a trifling one, Anichka was terrified by the feeling that she would have to go through that kind of thing more than once in the future.

She waited impatiently for day to come. At last the sun rose. The snowy plains took on a rosy shimmer. In the early rays of the sun the trees became covered with hoar-frost and the white snow glittered and sparkled so that the eye could no longer bear their brilliance. The young light of the day made the solitary cottages of the track-workers look like fairy huts, and every little detail —the striped bars at level crossings, a black dog barking at the train as it passed, kids waving their hands, a horse dragging a low wide sledge along the soft yellowish road—everything was draped in beauty and festivity. Admiring all this splendour, Anichka became calmer, her spirits rose. She now felt with new and greater force that the people sitting in the carriage behind her had been torn away from their families and plunged into worry, but were all really good in spite of their weaknesses; it was a war in which the threads of thousands of different destinies were fantastically entangled and spun into an enormous ball; and she, Anichka, was not just a simple human being, but her life was a part of that war and her future a riddle.

An aching love for all around her surged and swelled in her young heart. She was impatient to be at the front, where she would be able to express that love in deeds.

3

The train arrived in Moscow in the evening. When she found herself in Komsomolskaya Square, Anichka felt like kissing the frozen ground of her native city. She had never suspected she loved Moscow so much; on the contrary, she had thought she was completely indifferent to it and was even annoyed by the endless grandiloquence lavished on the capital in verse and song. Now she understood that words were weak and colourless compared with what the city stretching for miles around her really meant. Everything seemed to penetrate to her soul: every familiar building, the newspaper of the day pasted up on a hoarding, theatre bills, the bustle of the streets and the singing accent of the milkwoman from the suburbs. But the chief thing was that she felt the threads which linked the capital with every town and village and every army on every front, and sensed the eyes of millions of people turned full of hope and faith towards it.

Her heart seemed to stop beating when she entered her flat; it was so empty, cold and forsaken. The things were in their old places but the soul had gone out of them. The whole house with its many storeys reminded one of a broken-down tramcar abandoned by the passengers and standing alone in the middle of the street, cold and lifeless. A good half of the neighbours were either evacuated or at the front. Those who still remained welcomed Anichka with delight and were all eager to invite her to their flats—they had known her since she was a child, they knew her father and remembered her mother; many could even remember the first time she had been taken out for a walk in her perambulator. They were horrified at the thought that she had no bread coupons and each contributed a little to make up a frugal ration, which they brought her without fail during the following days.

Then all the trouble about getting into the army started. Applications had to be made to the City Military Commissariat and the Moscow Committee of the Young Communist League. Tired out by interviews and filling up forms, a wolfish hunger clawing at her vitals, her head reeling, yet light of foot and unperturbed in mind, Anichka wandered about Moscow unable to fill her eyes with the sight of its streets and squares, the columns of steel-helmeted soldiers occasionally marching past, and the balloons which lay in the middle of the boulevards, rocking gently at their moorings in the gusty wind.

Anichka did not go to see her relatives. Sometimes she was on the point of going to her Aunt Nadya in the hope of getting a square meal, but she did not, for she was unwilling to tell her aunt why she had come to Moscow and yet reluctant to tell her a lie. But soon Aunt Nadya herself came to see Anichka, somebody having seen the girl in the street and lost no time in telling her aunt.

Tall and full of figure and very much like Anichka's father, Nadezhda Modestovna took a long time to get back her breath after walking up to the third storey, for the lift was not working. Recovering at last, she stormed her niece with questions and exclamations. When Anichka told her why she had come to Moscow, she stared with bewilderment and flopped into an armchair. Then she suddenly showed a resemblance to some grandmother or great-grandmother of hers who came from a family of Moscow cattle dealers; she forgot all her polish and refinement and screamed: "What rubbish you've got into your head! Have you gone out of your mind? And you Alexander's only daughter! You'll be the death of him, you will!"

Although she loved Aunt Nadya, Anichka really hated her at that moment. But hearing that Valerik, her aunt's elder son, had joined the Volunteer Home Guard and was missing, she threw her arms round her neck and they wept together for a long time. All the tension of the last weeks was released in those tears, and they were a request for forgiveness for her fleeting hate of her aunt.

Nadezhda Modestovna soon calmed herself, thinking that she had almost persuaded Anichka to give up her plan. Her first demand was that her niece should come and live with her. Her husband, Ilya Ivanovich, worked in the Moscow Area Air Defence Headquarters. They got good rations. As it happened, she had to go to collect their rations, and she insisted on Anichka going with her. The girl did so, and for the first time for months she saw sausage, smoked fish and butter. Her mouth watered at the sight, yet she was ashamed to tell her aunt how she was longing for a decent meal. Then her aunt got a wonderful idea: her husband would fix up Anichka in a civilian job at Air Defence Headquarters. She would get good rations, and it would be the same as being at the front, for it was just as important and serious to defend Moscow against those vultures!

Anichka laughed as she listened absent-mindedly to her aunt's excited chatter and probed her own soul as though asking herself: "Wouldn't it be nicer to defend Moscow and to live at Aunt Nadya's and have sturgeon fillets for dinner?"

Aunt Nadya's flat was a large one, but she insisted that Anichka should sleep with her, for her husband worked out of town and rarely came home for the night.

Aunt Nadya prepared a bath and the forty-five-year-old woman and her young niece both splashed about happily in it, forgetful of the whole world. Aunt Nadya critically surveyed the girl, stroked her shoulders and breast with her plump hand and observed: "You've grown into a beautiful girl, Anichka. Well, love will come your way some day."

Then she broke into tears at the memory of her son, but with her usual light-headedness she passed immediately from sorrow to hope and said that he was probably with the partisans. A fine clever lad like him, so good at skiing and sports, didn't die just like that, all for nothing. These thoughts completely restored her peace of mind, and she even started saying that her son was alive with as much assurance as if she had irrefutable evidence of it.

In the semi-darkness Anichka slipped into her aunt's ample pink silk night-dress trimmed with ribbon. Aunt Nadya looked at her pretty arms and legs and that brought on another fit of emotion. Tears welled in her eyes, and she kept repeating, "A real picture! I never thought you'd turn out so pretty."

When they were in bed the mournful wail of air-raid sirens was heard over the city; the wireless, too, blared out the alarm. Anichka put out the light and raised the blackout curtain. Searchlight beams flashed across the sky, now and then picking out of the darkness the calm, far-off silhouette of a barrage balloon.

"I'm not going to the shelter, it's too boring," said Aunt Nadya, hugging Anichka closer.

Aunt Nadya chattered herself to sleep, but in spite of the soft bed and the pleasure of hunger satisfied at last, Anichka lay awake for a long time looking at Aunt Nadya's complacent double chin and white throat. Again a sudden feeling of dislike surged up within her for that woman who could sleep when her son was missing and anti-aircraft guns were firing. She felt that she was wrong, for whatever happens one cannot do without sleep. Yet she could not get rid of the feeling, and she even moved away so as not to smell the pleasant refreshing scent of Aunt Nadya's bathed body, toilet soap and perfume.

"The Lord have mercy on you," the aunt whispered in her sleep, and Anichka realized that she was talking to her son in her dreams. But that old-fashioned expression, too, left Anichka cold. She translated it into German according to a habit she had formed at the institute, and it immediately occurred to her that German mothers used the same words when praying for their sons who were now bombing the Moscow suburbs.

4

Three days later, in the morning, Professor Belozyorov arrived from the front by plane.

He came in, tall and stout and some of his refinement gone, his moustache grey and his head already quite white, bringing with him peculiar unaccustomed smells of petrol, leather equipment and smoke. He was sunburnt and weather-beaten, and his large blue eyes—they were just like Aunt Nadya's—seemed still bluer and kinder than before.

"An old front-liner requests hospitality," he shouted with a ring of pride in his loud humorous voice.

As usual his presence inspired calm, kindness and mutual understanding. Not that he lavished smiles or kind words—he spoke little and seldom smiled. Perhaps it was above all the expression of his eyes: they were full of trust, even love, and they made you trust and love him. He was kind almost to the point of weakness—so kind that nobody could bring himself to abuse such exceptional kindness.

Professor Belozyorov was an eminent surgeon. He placed his profession above all others in the world, and even at fifty-seven he held it in the same awe as in his youth. This did not prevent him from being impatient at the slow progress made in medicine; but in his optimism he foretold that it would reach unprecedented heights in the next twenty years, as a result of achievements in other sciences, allied and otherwise, some of which were bound to have unexpected and decisive influence on medicine.

The first thing the professor did on arriving at Aunt Nadya's was to wash. While he dried his hands carefully, as though about to perform an operation, he cast sly glances at Anichka. From time to time he said: "Well, my girl, how are you getting on?"

Aunt Nadya's husband must have sent word to him at the front that Anichka was in Moscow and what she was planning to do. At any rate, the professor did not at first mention the matter to his daughter. He just sat beside her and, instead of asking questions, spoke about his work at the front, complicated operations, serums, and blood transfusions. Having been brought up in a doctor's family, Anichka was familiar with medical terms, and it was a pleasure for the professor to be able to talk to her as to a colleague, using Latin and recalling cases in his pre-war practice.

He gave her his impressions of the front, too, rather overdoing it to make life there seem drab, dull and even boring.

Although he was jealously fond of his daughter, Professor Belozyorov's attitude towards her was the extremely critical one of many intelligent fathers. He thought her whimsical, lazy and too dainty in tastes and habits. He gave her credit, of course, for her good qualities—her intelligence, inborn kindness, enthusiasm tempered by a well-developed sense of humour and firmness of character. But in her firmness of character he often saw no more than the extravagance of a young lady. The term "young lady" on his lips was a severe reproach: it meant idle, delicate and squeamish—what he sarcastically called the "birthmark of capitalism."

Professor Belozyorov believed in bringing up children strictly and inuring them to privations and physical labour. That at least was his theory, but in practice he displayed towards his daughter a weakness which oppressed and irritated him. He half-heartedly excused himself on the grounds that Anichka had lost her mother at the age of thirteen and that his time was completely taken up by his work.

He obviously had a poor opinion of the education Anichka got at home, at school and in her general environment. He seemed to cling to the rather primitive view that education consists mainly of all kinds of precepts, exhortation and advice. He forgot that the girl's surroundings and the daily examples of disinterested labour and devotion to duty shown by many of her acquaintances, and by her father in particular, made a deep impression on her. He overlooked the fact that she was as critical towards life as her age allowed and semi-consciously rejected anything that was not in keeping with the ideal fostered in her by her family and close acquaintances. In a word, intelligent and penetrating as he was, the professor knew little of his own daughter and of what went on within her.

That was why he was surprised and alarmed by her idea of running away from the institute and going to the front. It was so unexpected and unlike her, he thought.

As he spoke of his life at the front he kept his eyes fixed on her, expecting her to tell him about herself. But she did not; she restrained her emotion and watched him from under drooping eyelids. Neither he nor she had the courage to begin such a serious talk after their long separation, for they both felt that it might end in disagreement and mutual displeasure.

At last the father decided to broach the subject and asked her why she had taken so rash a step without consulting him first. She tried to explain to him the train of her thoughts and her motives, and as he listened to her he thought that, had she not been his daughter, he would have seen the force and legitimacy of her motives in the circumstances. But she was his daughter, and as he looked at her young flushed face and thought that she might be killed, fear froze his heart. Yes, it was the old, old instinct; and, no matter how objective he tried to be, he could not get away from it. Then he tried to cover up the truth with considerations of minor importance. Even if she did hate the institute, he said, running away from it was a breach of discipline which could not be tolerated in war-time. Finally, he simply suggested that she should enter a medical institute, or, if she was so eager, go to the front with him.

Realizing how weak his argument was, he sought all the more for eloquent and convincing words to dissuade his daughter from her plans. But his efforts proved futile. She refused to go with him, for she did not wish "to remain a professor's daughter all her life." She would enter the institute after the war.

Then he suspected her of wanting to go to the front for some other, purely personal, reason. She had probably met some officer from the front, and he had put the idea into her head. The professor had heard of such cases.

When he said this outright, Anichka flared up under the insult. But she knew how groundless his suspicions were, and she just shook her head proudly and said that she thought the whole conversation was useless and contemptible and she was sorry that good people could harbour such wicked thoughts.

Next day General Belozyorov flew back to the front without having persuaded his daughter.

Anichka's applications to the Moscow Y.C.L. Committee and the Military Commissariat for enrolment in the army had not yet had any result, her running away from the institute having naturally put people on their guard. Then she resolved to apply to an old friend of the family, Lieutenant-General Silayev, who was on the General Staff.

Luckily, he lived in his office; his family was evacuated, and he did not want to go home to his cold flat, which was so full of heart-stirring reminiscences. Besides, he had too much work to keep to his old habit of going to and from his office every day.

General Silayev was a thick-set man with a powerful neck and close-cropped hair. He had given up his job as a farm labourer some time in the distant past to join the Red Army, in which he had remained ever since. He could not imagine himself doing any other work or wearing any other clothes than army uniform. He was a soldier in the best sense of the word, for he combined unquestioning submission to authority with the ability to make others obey him just as unquestioningly; an outward bluntness, almost akin to roughness with profound knowledge of the soldier's soul, and erudition in military history, and unconditional understanding of and respect for the dignity of a general with an inborn and invincible democratic spirit in his dealings with men that won him the hearts of his subordinates.

To Anichka's great joy he did not even attempt to doubt the expediency of her conduct. He at once understood and appreciated everything, and, contrary to Anichka's fears, he did not breathe a word about the difficulties awaiting her or her "delicate upbringing."

His answer was: "Good. I see. Quite clear. Yes, of course. Where do you want to go?"

She replied that she knew German and thought that after the necessary training she would be able to work behind the enemy lines. He drummed with his fingers on the table and repeated "Indeed, indeed."

"I speak German like a native."

"Indeed, indeed."

"And I shall be able to carry out any assignment behind the enemy lines."

"Indeed, indeed." He went on drumming with his fingers.

At last he stopped drumming and was silent for a long time, nodding his head as though thinking hard. He seemed to be trying to find the best and quickest way of fulfilling her wish, but in reality he was wondering how to avoid doing so. He fully understood her aspiration and completely shared her feelings. Had he been in her situation, knowing the enemy's language perfectly at the age of twenty, he would probably have had the same desire as she. But he had too much affection and esteem for Professor Belozyorov to send his only daughter on such a complicated and dangerous mission, contrary, he guessed, to her father's wishes.

"This is what we'll do," he said at last. "We'll settle it this way: go to the Military Commissariat and get them to enlist you in the army. Then come to me. The Military Commissariat will be given the order to enlist you."

He accompanied her to the stairs and stood watching her a long time from the top, shaking his head and grunting with amusement.

Thanks to General Silayev's efforts Anickha was sent as an interpreter to Western Front Headquarters. She found herself in a large quiet village sharing a room with two teleprinter operators, Klava and Masha. The winter was not excessively cold, but windy. It was in general very quiet there, much quieter than in the Volga town far behind the lines that Anichka had run away from. The broad street was cut off from the outside world by barriers at which sentries in sheepskin coats were posted. The officers at headquarters had a lot of work, but it all seemed routine office work to Anichka. They never fired a shot; all they did was to write and phone. There were so many telephones that the whole neighbourhood was a tangle of wires, some fixed to telegraph poles, some just lying on the ground.

At first Klava and Masha made it their duty, as the oldest inmates, to do all the work in the room, cleaning, bringing water and even washing Anichka's handkerchiefs with their own. Anichka hardly noticed this at first, or rather she found it quite natural. But she became conscious of it one day and it gave her a shock. She immediately reversed the roles and took upon herself all the household work, for her duties kept her far less busy than the other two girls, who had to sit night after night in the underground telegraph room.

The girls liked her and said that she was very nice, though a little unsociable.

She did indeed seem unsociable to those round her. She was haughty and cold with the men, and rebuffed them with cutting remarks. If any of them were too familiar with her she punished them by telling of their advances, apparently quite innocently, but loud enough for everybody to hear, even in the presence of senior officers, and made such fools of them that they were ashamed to show themselves. This method of self-defence proved very effective. They nicknamed her "the great resistance centre." Strange as it may seem, everybody, even her victims, liked the way she behaved; they respected her and in a way were proud of her. Her experience with the lanky lieutenant in the train had obviously been useful.

"Oh, it's just too funny!" exclaimed Klava when she heard how Anichka dealt with her admirers at headquarters. "That's the stuff, Anichka, just what they deserve! You're the right sort."

But Anichka herself did not think she was the right sort. On the contrary, she thought she was wicked, whimsical, unbalanced and too much given to reflection; in a word, that she thought too much and never did anything without weighing all the pro's and con's. She thought it dishonest to be good as a result of previous reflection; one should be good unconsciously; only then could one be calm and happy.

Almost immediately on arriving at Army Headquarters Anichka took steps to be sent either to the enemy's rear, or, if not, to a more forward area. But it turned out to be a difficult matter, largely owing to General Silayev's secret "machinations" and to the fact that Army Headquarters naturally knew whose daughter she was. Besides, her desire to be sent to a regiment or a division somewhere nearer the front was considered by many as childish romance and was therefore not encouraged.

The months Anichka spent at Army Headquarters were, however, not useless to her. She got into the army spirit and way of life and mastered a number of concepts and habits which one cannot do without in the army. Besides that, she took part in the interrogation of the rare prisoners of war (our counter-attack in the Moscow area was already over and there were few prisoners) and applied herself to the translation of German letters and documents, thus learning the style of German military documents and correspondence in general. She also made a thoròugh study of the organization, regulations, uniforms, insignia and decorations of the German army. The numbers of German divisions ceased to be meaningless words—the enemy was no longer a terrifying abstraction, but took the form of flesh and blood, figures and facts.

Finally, she elaborated her own code of behaviour, which made the others call her "unsociable" but created around her an atmosphere unspoilt by ambiguous attention.

Nevertheless, she persisted patiently in her aim and succeeded in getting gradually nearer to the front line: from front headquarters to army, from army to division, and at last to regiment.

Anichka related all these developments to Colonel Verstovsky in Captain Akimov's dug-out the night before the engagement. Her account was of course brief and contained no mention of the most complicated part—her own mental sufferings.

The colonel merely shook his head and sighed.

"Your poor father!" he said.

He looked at his watch and remembered that it was time for him to go. Yet he found it hard to leave Anichka; he felt as though he were committing some crime towards his friend General Belozyorov by leaving his daughter there, alone without anybody to take care of her.

"I must go," he said at last. "I have to be with your regimental commander during the battle. You come too. There's nothing for you to do here."

Bending down towards her, he looked anxiously round and told her that the regiment was being relieved next day.

Then he went to his car, which was concealed in a gully, got in, and drove to regimental headquarters. But even in the car his mind was not at rest, and he surprised the driver by continually repeating: "Well, well, Anichka, my girl!"

CHAPTER THREE

FIGHTING RECONNAISSANCE

1

THE DIVISIONAL commander, Major-General Mukhin, arrived at Major Golovin's command post at the same time as Verstovsky. When he had heard the regimental commander report on preparations for the coming battle, the general said: "I don't know what to do with Akimov. Today I got an order to send him to Moscow for retransfer to the navy."

"At last!" Golovin exclaimed, glad for his friend. But he at once added: "A pity, though. He's such a good officer."

The general gave him a keen look. "What do you think: should we let him fight this action or send him off at once?"

Golovin hesitated a long time before answering. For the success of the engagement, of course, it was not advisable to send Akimov back now. On the other hand, nobody is irreplaceable. Still, it would be a tough job.

The major looked at the general. They were both thinking the same thing.

"It would be better for him to see it through, after all," the general said slowly.

At that minute Akimov was going over the forward area, looking in at every dug-out and shelter, and calling each machine-gunner and rifleman on guard in a low voice. He stopped to inspect every machine-gun and fire a short burst into the darkness.

Most of the soldiers who were not on watch were sleeping, as Akimov had ordered. The air was stuffy and laden with the smell of drying foot-cloths and tobacco; snores and heavy breathing, coughing and broken words muttered in sleep could be heard.

"Sleep on, my friends, sleep on," he murmured in the words of an old song. "Tomorrow the storm will break." And thrusting viciously with the toe of his boot at the water in a deep puddle he continued: "At dawn my voice you'll hear, to death or glory calling."

"Who goes there?" a voice challenged him, but the soldier immediately recognized him and saluted.

"Hello," Akimov said, "who are you?"

"Vytyagov."

"Good evening, Sergeant. Not asleep?"

"No, Captain."

"Why not?"

"I just can't."

"Have you cleaned your gun?"

"Yes, everything's in order."

"Did they give you ammunition?"

"Yes."

"Armour-piercing too?"

"Yes."

"What are the Germans doing?"

"Having a nap. They send up a flare now and then. Shall we have a smoke, Comrade Captain?"

"Certainly."

They lit cigarettes. In the light of the match Vytyagov's face could be seen, calm and kindly.

"Are we going to be long in this sodden place?" he asked.

"That's a question for God and the Commander-in-Chief."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"What's the matter? Finding it hard?"

"Well, it's sort of boring."

"War's no fair. Lie down and have a sleep, Sergeant. You need a good rest."

"Is fighting on sea better than on land, Comrade Captain?"

"Depends on the land. There's so much water here you can hardly call it land."

"Ha-ha! You're right there."

"Who's that sniggering?"

"Me, Korzinkin."

"Oh, the medical orderly. So you're not asleep either?"

"No, as you see. Faizullin and I are having a bit a jaw."

"You're here as well, are you, Faizullin? It's not right, you know, you, the Y.C.L. organizer, setting such bad example."

"A Y.C.L. organizer's not supposed to sleep, Comrade Captain!"

"Enough of your political stuff! What are you talking about?"

"Life in general. What it'll be like after the war, I mean."

"You're looking well ahead."

"Take Faizullin, he wants to go to a fishery institute."

"Just a fishery school," Faizullin corrected.

"All right. He says in Kazan where he lives. . . ."

"Enough of his cock-and-bull stories about where he lives. Lie down and sleep. I'm telling you in your own interest. This just won't do."

Akimov shook his head and grinned in the dark. Then he went off in the direction of the battalion cook-house, which was in a blind passage on the side of a big gully. The fire there made it light and warm. Makarychev, the cook, his face beaming with calm satisfaction, reported that all was in order.

"What are you giving us for breakfast?" Akimov asked.

"Millet concentrate."

"Got no meat?"

"I didn't put any in. Do you want me to?"

"Yes, do."

"We've already had more than our ration, Comrade Captain."

"That doesn't matter. Put some in. Can't starve the horse to save fodder."

"So you want me to put some in, Comrade Captain?"

"Yes, a double lot. Understand?"

"Yes."

"And serve breakfast at five thirty. Got a watch?"

"Of course I have."

Akimov went nearer and checked the cook's watch—an old-fashioned silver one—with his.

"It's slow," he said. "Put it forward twelve minutes."

He stood there a while in silence, enjoying the gentle warmth of the cook-house fire. Then he went to his observation post. You got there by a long narrow slit that came to a blind end where it was roofed with a double layer of logs and earth on top. Under this the slit had been widened out a little and an embrasure cut out. Normally there was a machine-gun position here, but it had now been rigged out as an observation post. The wireless operator had fixed up his set and now and then checked reception by repeating in a sleepy voice: "One, two, three, four, five. . . ."

Several telephones stood in a row on the ground, which was covered with willow switches just like the dug-out. Obviously Mayboroda had found time to see to things here too, as the presence of a bench further proved.

Akimov sat on the bench and looked through the embrasure. The same irksome endless rain was pouring down. It was dark, and besides there was a blanket of fog over low-lying places so that you could not even see the stream. Only an occasional flare shed a pale glare over the darkness and the fog, which billowed like slowly rising smoke. Then you could see the reeds on the banks writhing as though in prey to some terrible agitation.

Across the stream, on the high bank which was such a good defensive position, there were woods, villages still intact with their peasant log cottages, and beyond them the town of Orsha that Akimov had not known of before except from his school-books. But for a month that town had been the goal of his every dream. In spite of the joy which he naturally felt at their impending relief, he was sorry in a way that he was not to be allowed to take Orsha. And what was perhaps more disappointing, he would never capture the high wooded area he could see from the forward sector, every inch of which he knew from ceaseless observation. How much fire-wood they could get there and how they could conceal their positions in those groves! How many comfortable dug-outs and bath-houses with planked walls they could build there! The soldiers had always looked with longing eyes at that coveted piece of ground, that "Land of Canaan," as Mayboroda, who was well versed in scriptural expressions, called it. Then snow would come instead of the putrid rain and they would be able to do some real fighting.

Of course it was not just one little plot of earth that mattered. However front-line life at battalion level narrowed down a man's interests and desires, Akimov never lost sight of the importance of Orsha for the army as a whole; it was a junction of strategic and supply roads that would take our troops right into Poland.

The wind blew through the embrasure, driving in drops of rain. Akimov wiped his face and it flashed through his mind how fine it would be to race forward, not just a couple of hundred yards as the order told him, but on and on over Byelorussian soil and to enter Poland as liberators. And beyond that lay Germany and France and the Atlantic shore.

He laughed to himself at his extravagant strategic plans which were so far beyond the forces of one single unit. For the present it seemed they would have to advance over those couple of hundred yards through a sheet of fire. "We'll come, indeed we will, but we need time," Akimov said as though speaking to Poland and France, of which he often thought with deep feeling.

It was still raining. Visibility would be bad during the battle, so liaison had to be flawless. On the other hand, the fog would make it easier to bring the men up for a short rush forward. After weighing up the situation, Akimov rang up Major Golovin, but the latter was out.

"He's on his way to you," said the duty officer at regimental headquarters. "With Number Ten."

Akimov heard the signalmen speaking in low voices behind his back.

"You there, Mayboroda?" he asked, also in a low voice. No matter how dark it was he could always feel the presence of his orderly.

"Yes."

Akimov sent Mayboroda for the company commanders and sat down to wait for the regimental commander to arrive with Number Ten—the divisional general.

Before five minutes had elapsed torches flashed along the slit. Akimov went out and reported: "First battalion's preparing to carry out the task assigned. Battalion commander Captain Akimov."

"Stand at ease," came the general's voice, and his hand stretched out of the darkness and shook the captain's. "Well, how are things, Battalion Commander?"

Akimov informed him of his operation plan, mentioning his intention of using the cover of the fog.

"Good," the div commander said. "But suppose the enemy notices?"

"He won't be able to fire accurately in the fog anyhow," Major Golovin put in on the captain's side.

"How's morale?" the div commander asked.

"Good."

"Well, that's the spirit. You're all right in the water here. In your own element."

"Won't you give us any tanks?" Akimov enquired.

"No."

"Very good."

"I don't think it necessary."

"Very good."

"What do you want tanks for? First of all, you can't see a thing. Secondly, the ground's so bad that tanks won't get you anywhere. Thirdly, tanks would give us away when they moved up."

"Very good."

"Very good, very good! You keep repeating 'very good,' but at heart you're furious! I'll give you plenty of artillery. We'll give them such a plastering that they won't know what to do with themselves."

"Very good."

"Well, that's all. Get on with it. I've brought you a stereoscopic telescope. Keep your eyes open as though you had an army under your command. Representatives of one mortar and two artillery regiments will be coming presently. The attack will begin with a Katyusha barrage—all the division's got."

"Thank you, Comrade General."

"What are you thanking me for? Do junior officers have to thank their seniors? I'll thank *you* when you've seen this through."

"I'm sorry, Comrade General."

"That's better."

The general was silent for a minute. Then he suddenly flashed his torch in the battalion commander's face. It was serious and tense in its frame of dark beard.

"Would you like to go back to sea?" the general asked unexpectedly.

Akimov was surprised at such an irrelevant question, but the general went on without giving him a chance to answer. "Just to feel yourself as far away as possible from here, somewhere on the blue sea? Well?"

Akimov made a vague gesture and said: "The only place I'm anxious to be in now is that German trench over there."

The general flicked off his torch and said in a slightly altered voice: "So long, Battalion Commander!"

He went slowly back along the slit and Major Golovin, heartily shaking hands with Akimov, followed him. Soon the car was heard driving away.

"If only dawn would come!" somebody said.

"Have passages been cleared through the mine fields?" Akimov asked.

"Yes," answered Firsov's voice out of the dark.

Not far off in the ravine mess-tins could be heard rattling. The men were having their breakfast.

Dawn came parsimoniously, as though reluctantly.

But still Akimov recognized every face among the men standing almost one behind the other in the narrow slit. He glanced at his watch, and when he looked up he saw the interpreter standing among the others. He looked away quite indifferently and noted his indifference with fleeting satisfaction.

"Check your watches," he said with a kind of solemnity in his tone. The watches glistened in the hands of the officers, some pocket watches, some wrist watches. "Nought five four nought."

Then he turned to the company commanders.

"Pogosyan, you can start to move forward. Belsky, you start in twenty minutes. No noise. Keep up liaison all the time—by runner if necessary."

The two company commanders stood still for a minute and then went out.

Akimov turned and went back to his OP. His telescope was already in its place, its two glass eyes peering out into the distance. Mayboroda was sitting in the corner with his arms round his knees. The wireless operator was bent over his set. Low voices came from the artillery spotters' dug-out near by.

The fog was getting thicker. It was like the morning haze that sometimes lies on the sea and Akimov suddenly imagined that the grey fog really did hide the sea and that when it lifted he would see the dazzling blue of the water and the smart silhouettes of ships.

His fancy got the better of him and he saw before him the well-known scene of a pier and the bustle of vessels of all sizes and descriptions in the narrow bay. He even thought he smelt the briny air.

A seaside town, he thought, is really not much different from any other town. The streets, the houses, the pavements are all the same. In spring green grass sprouts between the stones by the walls in one just as in the other. You go along one of those quite ordinary streets and suddenly, as you turn a corner, the tapering lines of masts and yards rise in front of you and the whole world is immediately transformed: what was ordinary becomes extraordinary and you feel an insatiable desire for movement and travel, a thirst for something new.

While giving rein to his imagination, Akimov was all the time aware that it was only on the surface and that deep down in him was a racking, all-pervading thought: what was really going on in that fog which had changed from grey to milky white? Where were his men? Pogosyan, Belsky, Vytyagov and many others whose faces he knew and for whom anxiety lurked in his heart. To be frank, it was not as men that he was thinking of them at that minute, but only as executors of the supreme will that was compelling the divisional commander and Colonel Verstovsky, Major Golovin and him, Captain Akimov, the gunners, signalmen and sappers, the whole regiment and the whole army, to risk their lives in the fight. Nobody could force those men to do what they were doing, only the undying sense of duty woven deep in the very fibre of their being.

"Have some breakfast, Comrade Captain," Mayboroda said, more to satisfy his conscience than for anything else, for he knew quite well that Akimov would not eat anything at a time like that. Akimov did not even answer him. He was waiting. Suddenly there was a low buzz of the phone. Lilac (code name for Pogosyan) and then Violet (Belsky) reported that their units were on the forming-up line ready for the attack.

2

The fingers of Akimov's watch were moving towards eight. The tension was unbearable. Suddenly the roar of the first salvo rent the air.

The dug-out shook. Rooted to the spot, Akimov kept his eyes fixed on a trembling log from which now and then pieces of clay fell. The guns were roaring. Their thunder now merged into one mighty terrifying rumble, now split up into separate smaller ones.

Akimov went to the embrasure. Ahead was the unbroken blanket of fog, slowly blackening from the smoke of the shelling. Nearer, the fine rain which was still falling was like a net stretched aslant before him.

When the artillery bombardment was over, the salvo of Katyushas screamed like a tempestuous wind across the dark sky. Then Akimov's ear caught a sound, muffled by the fog, but all the same distinguishable, the cheer of the men going into the attack: "Hurrah!"

The fog was definitely a hindrance now. It made it difficult for the artillery to follow the movement of the infantry and prevented Akimov from directing operations. What was going on in the fog seemed remote and unreal—incapable of being influenced from without.

Akimov got on to the first company by phone. They reported that machine-gun fire was holding them up and that the fighting was going on in the fog.

"Where's the fire from?" Akimov asked.

"Flanking fire from the right."

"Are you far from the enemy positions?"

"How can we tell? Doesn't look like it."

"Any small arms fire?"

"Not much."

"Neutralize the machine-gun fire yourselves. Go ahead. Keep on advancing."

Things were worse with the second company, where Belsky was in command. After crossing the stream they were immediately caught in heavy fire and had to lie flat in the sedge on the bank.

"Make a dash forward and rush the trench," Akimov said. "Lilac is well ahead, you're lagging behind."

To make up for the bad weather, probably, somebody in a romantic or facetious frame of mind had given names of flowers as code names for the different units. It was strange to be exchanging words like Lilac, Violet, Jasmin and Iris in fog, rain and slush. The artillery regiment, for example, was Daisy, and the devastating guards Katyusha mortars were Bluebell. Flowers of all descriptions, forest flowers, field flowers and garden flowers, were calling in alarm to one another, evoking many an unnecessary memory.

Meanwhile, the German artillery, which had been silenced for a while by our shelling, became noticeably more active. Ours answered and an artillery duel ensued. From the dug-out next door orders to the gunners became more frequent and pressing. Shrapnel, high explosive shells, and fragmentation shells were fired at different angles of elevation and in different quantities, by single guns or by whole batteries and sometimes even by the whole of division artillery over the strip of fog, changing it from milky white to fiery red.

At last the fog slowly lifted and the forward area that Akimov had been waiting so long to see was spread before his eyes. But there seemed to be nothing of particular interest there, except now and again small figures, in grey greatcoats, running here and there, crouching so low that they almost merged with the ground. There seemed to be very few of them. And few indeed there were.

"What's holding you up?" Akimov kept shouting into the phone. "Can't you understand me, Violet? What's holding you up?"

But before Belsky had time to answer the line was cut. While the signalmen were out mending it, the line to Pogosyan went dead too. Just then Golovin rang up: "Akimov, report on the situation."

And his line too was cut.

"I'll go to Belsky," Remizov said. "The poor devil's got completely stuck."

Akimov nodded and sat down at the telescope again.

When Pogosyan's line was working he triumphantly reported that he had rushed the German trenches and was fighting there.

"Do you understand?" Pogosyan shouted at the peak of excitement. "Do you understand or do you not? He had knife-rests and bobby traps here. I'm clearing the blasted things away now. They're all over the show. Do you understand me or not? Situation's very bad."

"Consolidate," Akimov told him. "Help Belsky. Clean up the trench to your left. Get your mortars ready. Move your anti-tank gun up. I can see the enemy assembling in the village and getting ready to counter-attack. Why can't I hear your machine-guns?"

"They're coming up, do you understand? Here they are now. There's hedgehogs and mines all over the place."

"Help Belsky—he's stuck. Can you see what's holding him up?"

"Belsky? Holding him up? Nothing's holding him up! I don't know why he doesn't go on. Here it's really a hell of a job. Can you understand me or not? But Belsky's sector's as quiet as a graveyard." He paused a while and then added in a lower voice: "We've captured two machine-guns here." And still lower: "And two cases of wine."

"See that nobody touches it," Akimov warned, "or when I get there I'll give you all hell."

Communication with Belsky was soon restored. "Held up by mines, Comrade Captain," he said. "The place is full of them."

"Where are the sappers?"

"Here. They're working. But there's such a lot of mines."

"Look how far Pogosyan's got. He's in their trenches already."

"He's lucky, the enemy's offering him no resistance at all. . . ."

"Enough of that," Akimov interrupted him. "It's no cake walk for him either. Where's Remizov?"

Remizov took the receiver.

"Remizov," Akimov said, "Belsky's taking it too easy. See what's the matter and warn him that if he doesn't carry out his assignment he'll be court-martialled."

About a minute later Akimov heard the same thing from Golovin over the phone: "The div commander told me to tell you that you'll be in for a court-martial if you don't succeed in this job."

"I see," Akimov muttered.

"And so will I," Golovin concluded.

"The more the merrier."

Soon the Germans launched a counter-attack on Pogosyan's sector. The figures of the Germans were popping up and down like jack-in-the-boxes. They seemed to be rolling down a hill playing some tricky game which consisted in trying not to fall, with somebody always pulling them down. Infantry were also concentrating in the enemy's second line of trenches.

Another Katyusha salvo screamed overhead. Columns of fire rose over the enemy's forward area. When they cleared up Akimov saw the Germans running back.

"On the run," Mayboroda said. Then he added, "*Sehr gut.*"

Cigarettes were lit in the slit. Voices started whispering. Everybody seemed to get excited.

Wounded men were carried past. Some of them were groaning faintly. Three other wounded men came back slowly and calmly over open ground, not even trying to conceal themselves, as though the wounds they had received were a guarantee against further ones. Akimov was furious. He stuck his head out of the dug-out and shouted: "Take cover, damn you!"

The men obediently went down into the slit and crouched not far from the observation post.

The first German counter-attack was followed by a second with three tanks in support. They too zigzagged as unwillingly, it seemed, as the soldiers, down to where our men were dug in. Then, just when it was most needed, the line was put out of action again.

"Oreshkin," Akimov called out, "go to Pogosyan."

"Lieutenant Pogosyan's killed," said one of the three wounded men whom Akimov had ordered down into the slit and who were smoking *makhorka* close by.

"Killed?" repeated Akimov. After a silence he added: "Oreshkin, take command of Number One Company."

Without taking his eyes away from the telescope he picked up the phone and said: "Hello, Lily! Send armour-piercing into those tanks. D'you hear?"

He was then called to the wireless by the divisional commander. "We're holding the first trench," he reported, "but the enemy is pressing hard."

The commander asked about the left flank. "Violet's lagging behind," Akimov replied. "Remizov's gone there. We'll straighten that out. I'd like them to shell the village—the enemy is concentrating there for a counter-attack."

Remizov rang up at last. "We've managed it," he said. "We made two gaps. Put the artillery on the square grove. There are two machine-guns there."

The gunners complied immediately, and without going away from the phone Remizov reported with growing enthusiasm: "Grand! Right on the target! A direct hit on a German bunker. That's what you call shooting! Thank them for us. We're out of the mire now."

Akimov himself could see the second company men, encouraged by the fine work of the gunners, rush forward without even crouching down. Soon a runner came and reported that Number Two Company had thrust forward into the enemy's trench and that hand-to-hand fighting was going on there.

When Akimov reported this to the regimental commander, Major Golovin said: "I am sending you a platoon from my reserves. Use it according to your own discretion." After a short silence he asked: "Will you hold on to that enemy trench?"

Akimov answered: "Yes."

He laid down the receiver, and his first thought was of Pogosyan. He had been so fond of a good meal and a good drink. He liked women too. His eyes fairly blazed when he saw one, whether she was pretty or plain, young or already aging. He loved them with a sort of unselfish love as one loves works of art. "Whoever invented them was no fool," he used to say, not cynically but almost bashfully. And my God, could he eat, that poor old Pogosyan! The exact opposite of Remizov.

Akimov slowly picked up the phone and called Violet. When they answered he said: "Tell Remizov to report back to me at the OP. Understood? Repeat."

Violet repeated.

Akimov lit a cigarette and listened to the men's subdued conversation.

"I like low clouds during a battle," Mayboroda said.

"Yes," the telephone operator agreed, "this is no fighting weather."

"When we were fighting near Yelnya . . ." another soldier started reminiscing.

"And by Rzhev . . ." another butted in.

Akimov was again called on the wireless by the general.

The div commander was quite pleased this time. "Thank you, Akimov," he said. "Will you hold out?"

"Yes, General," Akimov answered.

Immediately after this conversation Oreshkin reported that his men had been driven out of the enemy trench. "I'm coming," said Akimov.

He rose and buttoned up his greatcoat. Mayboroda rose at the same time, growing pale as he did. But Akimov sat down again and Mayboroda sighed and followed suit.

Then a small junior lieutenant with a pointed nose and large staring eyes entered.

"Platoon commander Junior Lieutenant Filkov," he said. "I was told to report to you for duty."

"How many men have you got?" asked Akimov.

"Eighteen."

"That's not many."

Akimov looked round and saw the long slit stretching from the OP to the rear where the wounded, who could not make up their minds to go on account of the ceaseless shelling, were sitting or standing with runners and signalmen.

"Run to Makarychev in the cook-house," Akimov said to Mayboroda, "and tell him and the cook-house men and drivers to come here as fast as they can. See that nobody remains behind. Bring them all here."

Mayboroda left, and Akimov went to the doorway of the dug-out.

"Three signalmen and the wireless operator will remain here," he ordered. "The others will report for duty to Junior Lieutenant Filkov. Those with light wounds included."

He went back to the embrasure and looked through the telescope for a minute. Then turning his head to the lieutenant he asked: "Have you been long at the front?"

"It's my second day," Filkov answered in an undertone, "but I'll do my best," he added.

"I understand," Akimov reassured him in a friendly voice.

Soon the "chaps from the rear" came—Makarychev and eight others. Akimov explained to Filkov what he would have to do and then said: "Report by phone or runner as soon as you arrive at Oreshkin's. I'll ask the div commander for another short barrage."

Akimov went out into the slit with Filkov, and having walked about two hundred yards he saw the junior lieutenant's platoon not far away in the ravine. The men stood up as he approached. They seemed pretty well exhausted, but were calm and inspired confidence.

Filkov mechanically said good-bye and marched off at the head of his platoon. Makarychev brought up the rear, red in the face, sweating and slightly limping. He fixed his miserable frightened eyes on Akimov, lagged behind the column a little and asked:

"What about dinner, Comrade Captain? Who's going to get dinner ready?"

"I will," Akimov answered pitilessly. Then he went back into the OP where Remizov was waiting for him, all black with smoke and mud, his eyes shining excitedly behind his spectacles.

"We beat back the counter-attack with hand-grenades," he said.

"You take my place here. Keep Golovin informed. I'm going to Oreshkin."

"But where is he?"

"In Pogosyan's place. Pogosyan got killed."

"Really?" said Remizov. "It's not more than an hour since I saw him."

"Let's go," Akimov said to Mayboroda.

3

They went along the slit and then turned off into another. The enemy was sending over mortar bombs, which were exploding all around. "What did he need to go forward for?" Mayboroda wondered wearily, hugging the wall of a communication trench. "His job is to direct the battalion, not to go nosing in the forward area." He gazed with something akin to anger at Akimov's provokingly calm nape. "Who told him to go? If he was ordered it'd be another matter. But there he is going by himself, God knows why. . . ."

Every time a German shell exploded Akimov said in a fairly loud and seemingly approving tone: "That's fine. Well done. Good, good."

He was indeed glad that the enemy was firing often and heavily, for it gave our artillery spotters the opportunity to pin-point his gun positions. That, after all, was the object of the operation.

"That's the way," he went on muttering, angry but gloating, as he watched shells out of the corner of his eye bursting right and left.

The trench got shallower and gradually came to an end. Not far away was a little brook, the banks of which could not be seen, everything being flooded all around, but could be guessed at by the sedge growing out of the water and the slender wisps of willow trembling in the wind, their tops and the catkins on them torn and shattered. The rain rippled the water. Not far away a telephone operator crouched on a mound with his head almost buried in the wet soil and his feet in the water, and kept on mumbling into the speaker: "Snowdrop, Snowdrop, Snowdrop! Comrade Akimov! Comrade Akimov!"

"Just look here," Akimov said. "Here's your Snowdrop beside you!"

The operator showed his face with the water streaming tear-like on it and immediately brightened up.

"Comrade Captain, Lilac informs you that Filkov has arrived. Wants to know when the artillery will open up."

"Tell him I'll be there presently. Where's Oreshkin?"

"Over there!" The operator pointed to a clump of shrubs on the other bank.

Akimov went on erect and Mayboroda was forced to do the same. His heart was in his boots, for he thought every German as far as Berlin could see him.

They crossed the brook and the flooded area on its banks, clinging to mounds emerging here and there and to the stones and beams that remained from a smashed bridge. The water gurgled under their feet, washing away yellow maple leaves. On the other side the water quickly got shallower, for the bank was steep. Freshly dug shallow trenches immediately came into view. They had obviously been dug but a short time before by our soldiers. Farther on, Filkov's men were lying around under some bushes. Akimov looked among them and found Makarychev, the cook, who already seemed to have improved his morale and was telling the men a story. They listened with repressed laughter and kept looking to the front.

Oreshkin, Filkov and Captain Drozd were sitting in a slit trench. "Well, how's it going?" asked Akimov, bending down over them.

Oreshkin gave him a pleasant smile, his pretty face beaming as if Akimov's presence changed the whole situation. "What are you sitting here for?" Akimov asked with scorn in his voice. "Pogosyan captured the trench, you let them drive you out of it and there you are now grinning. I'll have you court-martialled, you son of a bitch. Where are your men?"

Oreshkin went pale and climbed out of the trench.

"And where are your reccy fellows?" Akimov asked, turning to Drozd.

"Here, with me."

"Make them go forward with the others. Every man is precious now."

"I haven't got the right to—it's not their job," was Drozd's surly answer; "they have other duties."

"But they're not doing them," Akimov said, and his features hardened. "And what's more, they never will if they keep hanging about here."

"Jasmin and Daisy are going to start now," the telephone operator shouted from the slit trench.

The thunder of the artillery rolled again. Akimov went forward, saying to Filkov as he went: "Bring your men up behind us. We'll go after the barrage."

Number One Company were about a hundred yards farther forward. They rose and went with the officers, half crawling. Unfortunately the barrage was brief—it lasted only seven minutes, either because ammunition was short or because that was the order. Akimov swore violently. He went forward, his tall figure stubbornly erect regardless of the bullets already whistling around him. Suddenly he turned deadly pale, threw up his hand with the fist clenched, and shouted with all the strength of his lungs as sailors probably do during a storm: "Forward, comrades! For our Motherland!" And to everybody's surprise, doubtless including his own, he added an old saying he had got out of a book: "Disgrace not Russian arms in face of the foe!"

"Hurrah!" rang over the field, and all the men rushed forward, shooting as they went; they caught breath in gulps, slipped, fell, rose again under the spell of the mighty call still resounding in their ears. Machine-guns rattled away from behind and from the flank. Grenades split the air. Then all was silent. Mayboroda jumped into the trench on top of a German, grabbed at his face and furiously rubbed the back of his head in the mud. Then he came to his senses and looked round. The trench was full of our soldiers. Machine and anti-tank guns were hastily being put in position. Akimov, squatting on his haunches, bawled into the phone, swearing madly and hardly listening to the answer.

"Fire!" he shouted. "Bring up ammunition at once. Plenty of grenades and loaded cartridge drums. Are you asleep there, you rascals? Just wait till I get back, I'll show you, you whelps! Send the artillery officers up here. You can see better here!"

He stood up and said to Oreshkin: "Hold it now, do you understand?" His cap was gone, shot away by a bullet. "Your OP will be here in the trench," he went on. "Mine will be there in the bush where you sat grinning." He looked round and smiled wearily: "The trench is well fitted out—the Germans like order."

The trench was indeed well-built and even attractive. It was lined with planks and formed a series of even zigzags. The sleeping bunks, too, were lined with wood and the floor covered with straw mats. Orange-coloured plastic butter dishes with the remains of unfinished meals were lying around. The killed were lying there too, Germans and ours, side by side. There was an unmistakable smell of captured enemy trenches. Yes, the very air smelt different, hostile.

Akimov went along the trenches exchanging half-joking, half-serious remarks with the soldiers.

"So you see we've managed to get ourselves decent quarters. Dry—no draughts. See you hold on to them. You're not worth much if you let them chuck us back into the mud and muck."

Suddenly he was silent. Somewhere not far off he heard a female voice talking German. It was Anichka. She was sitting on an empty ammunition box with a notebook in her hand, interrogating a prisoner.

"Why are you here?" Akimov asked.

She looked up and answered with a haughty thrust of the chin: "The Germans won't let me any farther forward."

There was suppressed laughter among the soldiers.

"No, joking apart," Akimov said, reddening, "this is no place for you."

"Well," she retorted, coldly rising and smoothing her greatcoat. "Question them yourself."

"All right, but this isn't the place."

"All right, but he's wounded and can't move."

The captain looked askance at the prisoner, made a gesture of indifference and went on. "That was more than you were bargaining for," he muttered, not knowing whether to be angry or to laugh. Later on he and Drozd insisted that the interpreter should go to the rear with the prisoner and stay with Remizov in the old OP.

He looked among the soldiers for Makarychev and said with feigned severity: "Here's a fighting job for you. Go back. Get supper ready. Understand? Get going!"

Anichka set off for the rear with the prisoner, two reccy men and the battalion cook. It was true that the prisoner could not walk; they had to half-carry, half-drag him. When they were on the other side of the stream the German mortars opened up again and they had to lie flat in the mud. Mortar bombs were exploding all round and Anichka felt terribly afraid the German would be killed. But all went well and they were soon with Remizov.

He shook his head reproachfully as he helped Anichka to clean the mud off her coat. "I was uneasy about you all the time," he said. "Don't get angry with me, but honestly this is no place for a girl. The Germans have no idea that you wrote a paper about Schiller at the institute, you know. That won't stop them from killing you. Don't forget they're Nazis."

Remizov was preparing to move to the new OP on the other side of the stream, but the regimental commander would not yet allow the OP to go forward. Remizov prevailed on Anichka to go back to the dug-out in the ravine where the gramophone was. "There you can interrogate your prisoner properly and listen to music," he said as he picked up the telephone again.

Soon Anichka and the reccy men with the prisoner were back in the battalion ravine at which she had arrived the night before. The enemy fire had died down and there was no need for them to keep low, so they went along the edge. As the prisoner was heavy, they sat down for a rest on the edge of a smashed, burnt-out village. They made themselves as comfortable as they could near the blackened chimney stack of a wrecked cottage not far from the forward telephone exchange. Anichka decided to question the prisoner there and pass on the information immediately by phone.

From the soldier's pay book she identified him as a lance-corporal in the 78th Assault Division. His name was Hans Kühle and he came from Hanover. The number 78 itself was a revealing factor: that division had not been there before. Anichka whistled with surprise and satisfaction and began the interrogation.

It was reassuring for the prisoner to be questioned by a *Fräulein*, and a pretty one with a sweet voice at that. They were not going to shoot him after all, he thought. He even got rather perky. So far he had been disposed to tell all he knew, but now he made up his mind that that would be wrong and unworthy of a German soldier. So his answers became more and more evasive and in the end he refused to open his mouth. He worked himself up by mentally calling the Russians—including the fair girl who was interrogating him in such good German—torturers, sadists who took it out of a wounded man, and so on.

At length Anichka lost all patience and, looking him straight in the face, asked him whether he was going to reply to her questions. Again no answer.

"Very well," she said in a deliberate tone. "In that case I shall hand you over to the soldiers to be taken to headquarters." Then she turned and called Biryukov, one of the reccy men.

Biryukov went up to the prisoner and bent over him. He was a quiet reserved man from the Urals, and a more kind-hearted man one could not imagine. But to those who did not know him his flat face, slanting eyes and red wind-beaten cheeks seemed terrifying. Kühle recoiled in fear and immediately blurted out all he knew.

Proud of the success of her military cunning, Anichka wrote down what the prisoner told her, immediately phoned the most important details to the chief of staff at regiment and sent the prisoner behind the line with the reccy men.

Then she set off for the OP where Remizov was. Hardly had she reached the bottom of the ravine when the German mortars and cannons started a thundering barrage. The enemy had probably brought up artillery from other sectors. Anichka just managed to run to Akimov's dug-out. The ravine shook with the shelling.

Anichka was glad to find the dug-out empty. She closed her eyes, stopped her ears with her fingers and pressed against the switch-lined wall. She was terrified and did what all terrified people do.

Then the door squeaked and regiment signalmen carrying coils of wire crawled in, followed by Makarychev and a few other men. Anichka immediately sat down at the table, began to comb her short hair with affected unconcern and said in a knowing tone:

"Heavy shelling. The Germans have obviously brought more artillery over to our sector. Our attack seems to have scared them. Will our chaps hold out?"

"So long as the battalion commander's not killed," said Makarychev. He was deadly pale.

Anichka went on combing her hair and said: "I wish I could peep at what's going on."

She herself noticed how false her words rang. Then, overcoming her fear, she actually went out into the ravine and slowly crept forward along its western slope. The barrage soon stopped. The only thing to be heard was the fairly frequent rattle of machine-guns in the distance. It started raining again. A cart raced by without any driver. A terrible presentiment gripped Anichka's heart. It was Akimov that she was thinking of most. She had been with him in his OP during the whole battle and had seen and heard everything, including his language, which somehow had not even offended her ear. It would be terrible, she thought, if he were killed. For the whole battalion and the regiment. But for her too.

The noise of battle gradually quietened down; presently all was silent. Anichka was near the slit at the end of which was the OP. As she came nearer she could not even recognize the terrain. Everything had been torn up by the shelling. Where the OP had been there was a gaping crater. Men were digging in it. Just at the edge of it a man sat on the end of a twisted beam, bareheaded. It was Akimov.

One of the diggers crawled out of the crater, stood there a minute, and threw his spade down. Anichka went up to him and recognized Mayboroda.

"What's happened?" she asked.

"A direct hit. Killed Captain Remizov."

Anichka turned pale and clenched her teeth till her ears hurt. Then she looked at Akimov. He was sitting motionless, tears streaming down his cheeks. Anichka shuddered. She had never thought that man of steel whom she had observed for a whole day could cry. It shattered her to see that he could and actually was doing so. She wanted to go up to him and put her arms round him. Akimov looked up at her and slowly rose.

"You here?" he asked. Then he looked down again and pointed to the crater. "There's nothing left of him. Nothing."

Near by in the slit the telephone operator was obstinately, almost desperately, calling, sometimes in a low voice, sometimes louder, now insistent, now imploring:

"Lily, Lily, Lily...."

A group of wounded men appeared. When they reached the place where Akimov stood, one of them said: "Good-bye, Comrade Captain. P'raps we'll never see each other again."

"Vytyagov!" Akimov exclaimed. "Wounded?"

"Yes." The sergeant smiled. "But it's not dangerous." He walked on, and then turned back towards Akimov. "Pity, though. You're all going out for a rest and I'll be in hospital."

Akimov did not immediately grasp Vytyagov's meaning. He made a few steps towards the wounded men.

"What's that you said?" he asked. "Who's going to have a rest?"

Vytyagov stopped and turned to the battalion commander and, measuring him with a cunning glance, he said:

"As if you didn't know! Everybody knows. Last night Skoptsov and Alyoshin came back from the field ambulance battalion. There's no end of troops down there. We're going to be relieved." He was silent a while, and then he repeated: "Good-bye, Comrade Captain. We'll never forget you."

The wounded men went on, and Akimov watched them for a long time. Then his head drooped, his hands spread out in a vague gesture, he sighed and went forward.

It was getting dark quickly as it does in autumn. German flares often shot skyward—the enemy feared another attack. In the ravines and trenches all the men were quiet, each one had lain down where he stood. The rain had stopped. But at one o'clock at night there was a stand to. The men all jumped up and this was what they saw:

With a rattling of rifles and a clanking of mess-tins, their boots squelching in the mud, fresh troops were moving up. Well clothed and equipped, looking not too happy, but by no means dejected, they smiled at the depressed appearance of the men they were to relieve. They had not the slightest doubt about the cause of their depression when the pungent smell of powder and fire assailed their nostrils. They fully understood that a hard time awaited them, but there was no terror in their hearts as they settled down in the dug-outs that others had built, poured into all the slits and trenches, including those captured that day from the enemy, bustled about, fixed up things here and there, made themselves at home and changed boots to the accompaniment of grunts and sighs.

"Have a good rest," were their farewell words, said without any envy or ill-will, as the battalion formed up and marched off into the night.

CHAPTER FOUR

LOVE

1

A troop train was rolling eastward. Its speed was moderate, as befits a troop train not going to the front but leaving it behind. The men sat or stood the whole day, squeezing near the open doors to enjoy the boundless stillness of the endless grey fields. Flocks of birds flew southwards. Golden birches alternated with green fir-trees, and now and then a red wet mountain ash loomed near a well. But it was not the trees that had such a calming and peaceful effect on the soldiers—they had seen enough trees of all kinds—it was the sight of the stations, signal lights, signal boxes and warehouses, the smoothly-running railway system. Used as they were to long marches or journeys in lorries, the soldiers had almost forgotten that one could travel by railway, though they had often crossed lines without noticing them during the fighting.

The sight of restful villages and grey fields, the hooting of the engine and the thumping of the wheels evoked a feeling of calm, and their sleep was deep and undisturbed. They dreamed of kittens, hens and children—all for some reason scampering about in long watery ravines.

At night the only men awake were those who had to keep the fire going in the iron stoves. The others slept fast—they had many a sleepless night to make up for. It was the cold that woke them up, for the mornings were beginning to be frosty. They would jump down from their bunks, run barefooted to the stove to enjoy a cigarette of bitter *makhorka* and yawn and stretch as they put on their boots. At the very first station they would run with mess-tins to the cook-house carriage and, having breakfasted without much appetite, they would spend the whole day sleeping or watch the plains gliding past and breathe the clean cool wintering air in deep hungry gulps.

Where they were bound for none of them knew, and none of them cared much either. The divisional commander himself had not been informed of their destination. The military commandants at large stations knew no more than they needed to know—the next big station to which army train number so-and-so was to be directed.

The first battalion, exhausted by the recent battle, was exempted from all duties on the train. They slept fifteen hours a day and Captain Akimov lay in his bunk practically the whole day, hardly ever getting up. The taciturn Mayboroda brought him his meals, cleared up, and would not risk starting a conversation with the battalion commander, who was in one of those rare but hopelessly gloomy moods in which it was better not to try to make talk.

Akimov's bunk was by the window, and he looked out for hours on end without betraying by the slightest sound that he was awake. None of the other men in the carriage dared to speak, and, as the silence weighed on the battalion officers and headquarters staff who were travelling with him, they slipped off to their neighbours. Mayboroda thus remained alone, resigned and uncomplaining. Able at last to lay his hands on real fire-wood, he kept on heating the stove and enjoyed his solitude. Now and then he looked up and listened in case the commander said something or made some movement.

On the third day Akimov at last climbed down and asked for water to wash. Then he enquired, "Is Korzinkin alive?"

"Yes."

"And Faizullin?"

"He's wounded."

"Who are we travelling with?"

"The first and the second battalions and regimental HQ," Mayboroda answered, livening up. Then he started to tell the news. "The regiment is travelling in two trains. We're in the second. The regimental commander is in the first with the third battalion and the artillery. Second echelon too. When we go to the front they're in the rear, but when we leave it they're in the vanguard. The division is divided into ten trains. One leaves every day. I got some beer for you at one of the stations. Drink it, Comrade Captain, or it'll go flat. I bought it with money . . . it's such a long time since we bought anything."

Akimov drank the beer in silence. It was probably the first he had had since the beginning of the war.

"But it's fine to live without money," Mayboroda went on. "To be given everything you need, like at the front—clothes and good supplies. If only it wasn't for the war. . . ."

"So you don't mind the supplies but you don't want war?" Akimov grinned. "What about work?"

"Work?" Mayboroda replied, offended. "Why, you can't live without work."

"Well, that's almost communism," Akimov went on. "No war, peaceful work, and supplies just like at the front. Yes, you seem to be a Communist by conviction, Sergeant Mayboroda."

"That's what it comes to," Mayboroda muttered abstractedly. After a short silence he went on with the local news. "There were a few visits for you: the regimental engineer and somebody with a name like a bird, thrush or something; yes, Drozd. The interpreter came with them. Asked how you felt. Wanted me to play another record, too, but I chucked them away when we loaded up. No one knows where we're going. Some say to Moscow. To re-form, of course."

"Are they with us in this train?"

"Who?"

"Well—er—Drozd and the others."

"Oh, yes."

At the next station Akimov got out for a stroll. He went along the train. The platform of the battered station was full of soldiers walking up and down. A group of officers stood near a stall and Akimov immediately recognized Anichka among them. Then somebody called out to him: "Captain Akimov! Had enough sleep at last?"

"Yes," he answered laconically.

Anichka turned to him and shouted: "Akimov, come here!" and immediately went up and cordially shook hands with him. He felt embarrassed, but he scrutinized her with burning curiosity. What was she really like anyhow? Was she really what she had seemed to him the first day?

Yes, she was, as it happened. Only in the slightly hazy daylight she seemed nearer to earth, not so haughty and distant. In the way she greeted him and made the first steps towards him he saw good will, nothing else. Or was there something else? At any rate, in her behaviour he sensed a certain superiority and a consciousness of it too. In spite of her youth and the auburn curl that peeped from under her fur cap on to the white, perfectly smooth, high arched brow, in spite of all that, she bore herself as though she were senior to them all. Even her unexpected cordiality towards Akimov had something of self-conscious indulgence.

"Not shaved off your beard yet?" Firsov, the engineer, asked with surprise. "It's about time you thought of your appearance a little."

"Yes, it is," Akimov answered absent-mindedly. "I'd clean forgotten about it."

"Yes, you really must shave," Anichka urged. "There's a hairdresser's here in the station, and we'll wait for you."

He was ready to fulfil her desire immediately, but some obstinate wicked instinct forced him to give her a cold and almost hostile answer: "My beard isn't in your way, is it?"

This surprised and incensed her, but she controlled herself and said tartly: "Coarseness does not suit you any better than a beard." Then she looked him straight in the face and added: "There's no need to get nasty."

Akimov did not answer. He went back to the train, depressed. He could not imagine why he had been so rude to her. But then he realized that it was because she had shown too much feeling towards him. Yes, that was it. He did not want her to treat him the same as she treated others. Perhaps there was another thing too. He thought he had noticed a trace of coquetry in her voice. And if she could be coquettish with him, hardly knowing him, she could be so with anybody. This filled him with a nasty feeling of jealousy.

"I must own up to it," he thought, "I'm in love with the girl, and so much in love that I can't bear her flirting even with me."

Remizov, the only one with whom he could have shared his thoughts, was dead. What would he have said? That was what Akimov tried to imagine as he lay in his bunk.

"My dear fellow," Remizov would have said, "there are things you can't do anything about. But that doesn't mean they are necessarily bad. Besides, why not admit that you've made an impression on her? She's a decent girl, and pretty too. Don't overdo the modesty stuff. You're not so modest as to think yourself unworthy of her love. On the contrary, what's wrong with you is that you're too conceited, and that's where all your doubts come from. You want to be sure she cares for you. If you were you'd just run to her and try to get her under your thumb. You'd probably boss her about and pretend you didn't care for her so as to make her love you the more. I know that game when a man tries to subordinate the one he loves to himself, to make a slave out of her, even though he's aching with pity for her." Remizov's voice would have taken on a metallic ring and he would have ended up drily: "And mind you that's a survival of capitalism in your mind, and it's got to be rooted out."

Akimov gave a melancholy laugh; that was just what Captain Remizov would have said had he been alive.

In the evening the train stopped at Roslavl and Captain Labzin, the second battalion commander, came to see Akimov. He climbed up on to his bunk and whispered in his ear: "Come with me. I know a girl who lives here just by the station. I've been writing to her for a year. Let's pop over. The train'll be here for three hours. I asked. . . ."

"What do you need my company for?" Akimov was going to ask, but he suddenly said, "All right," rose and got dressed.

They went down a side street lined with railway sheds, turned off into another street and stopped by a garden in which there was a solitary red mountain ash. Labzin went first into a small standard house. He was a little flurried, for he had never seen the girl before. He had kept up correspondence with her ever since he got her letter to "the best sharp-shooter in the unit." Like thousands of other letters it had been written to comfort and encourage the writer more than the receiver.

The small room, furnished with only the strict necessities, was lighted by a candle. The two officers were welcomed in by a tall, rather thin woman about thirty years old, with tired features and lovely fair hair plaited and arranged in a wreath on the top of her head. This made her look younger and recalled her not so far-off girlhood.

The woman was greatly excited by the arrival of the two captains, one of whom could consider himself her friend. After the first words had been exchanged, Labzin lost his constraint and his spirits quickly rose. He brought out a bottle of vodka and a snack, which for some reason he called a bite. This jarred on Akimov.

"Call in one of your friends, Natasha," Labzin said. "We'll sit here and have a chat."

Natasha threw a dark shawl over her shoulders and went out. Labzin looked anxiously at Akimov and asked, "Well, what do you think? All right, isn't she?"

He was always rather sheepish in the presence of Akimov and now, even though he was by no means charmed with Natasha's appearance—she had looked much younger in the photo—he wanted him to like her. Akimov was sitting there apathetically, leaning his massive head on his hand, and this made Labzin nervous.

Ten minutes later Natasha returned with a friend. Akimov winced when he heard that her name was Anya. She was tall and had large grey eyes in a pale face.

They sat down at the table and drank. Constraint and shyness disappeared. Labzin said funny things and continually praised Akimov and belittled himself.

Akimov did not speak much, but he soon noticed to his embarrassment that Natasha preferred him to Labzin. She spoke only to him, but most of the time she was silent just as he was. Labzin was soon aware of her preference for Akimov, but he took no offence. His attention was absorbed by Anya and the two soon left together.

Alone with Natasha, Akimov felt awkward. This made him vexed with himself. He seemed to have none of the dash generally attributed to sailors. "Perhaps I should go," he thought, but he could not make up his mind. She snuffed the candle and said, "It's dark in our place now. The Germans blew up the power station."

Then she sat down by him again. They both felt embarrassed and perturbed. He thought of Anichka with a sort of wincing pleasure: "It's all over. Finished. Yes, of course it is. Fine. I've forgotten you. Won't torment myself any more. That's the end of it." He took hold of Natasha's hand. It was very hot. She was hot all over, like fire.

Then she said something else, and sighed....

He lay beside her, his mind almost a blank. "Everything will be all right now," he thought, looking absently at her plaits, which had come loose, and she said in a low voice, "Thank you. You're nice."

It was his kindly absent-minded affection she thanked him for, not what had gone before.

"I'll be wanting you," she said. "Awfully."

He believed her, in spite of their chance and fleeting acquaintance. She saw fate in what he considered just a coincidence. Although he had never seen her before, her face seemed familiar and beautiful. He even reproached himself for treating her like some soulless impersonal object to slake his passion. It suddenly occurred to him that he could stay there for ever and be happy. He could feel in her embrace and read in her wide-open eyes the story of a lonely life. The same war, but a different aspect of it.

The hoot of an engine not far away reminded him where he was and made him hurry. She threw her shawl over her shoulders and went out with him.

The train stood there, dark and silent. The engine was ready in front of it, belching sheaves of sparks.

They stood a while in the deep shadow of the station building. She had neither the right nor the power to hold him back even for a minute: she sank her head on his chest in the dark and with unfeigned wretchedness bade him farewell for ever. He looked down at her head and could not find in himself a single wicked thought, only pity and confusion.

2

Near his carriage Akimov saw a lonely figure.

"Is that you, Comrade Captain?" he heard Mayboroda's voice asking.

"Yes. Why aren't you asleep? Go and turn in."

"I was waiting for you."

"Well, here I am."

Mayboroda got in, but Akimov remained outside. Somewhere in the front of the train a pleasant voice was singing to the music of a guitar. Akimov thought he recognized the voice as Drozd's. He laughed as it occurred to him that Anichka had asked Mayboroda about the records. "If you can't have a nightingale," he thought, "you've got to be content with a thrush." Still Drozd's voice was not so bad after all.

As Akimov listened to the singing he suddenly thought that Drozd must be in love with Anichka. At any rate, the low distant strumming of the guitar made him melancholy and he wanted to go to Anichka. He tried to get rid of the thought by remembering Natasha and the lonely life that was her destiny, but by now he felt certain that the meeting with Natasha would not help to calm his agitation or take his thoughts off Anichka.

Railwaymen's lamps could be seen swinging in the dark. Somebody asked, "Will we soon be going?" and another voice answered, "You'll be here for about another half hour—the line's blocked."

Akimov went along the train and at last came up to the half-open door of the carriage in which headquarters staff was. The guitar had stopped playing. Low voices came from inside. Akimov stood a while at the door and at length got in. The occupants were sitting round the stove, which was burning brightly.

"Ah, Comrade Akimov," said Firsov. "Come in and sit by our fire."

Akimov strained his ear. No. No woman's voice could be heard. And yet he felt that she was there, sitting in silence close by. That was obvious from the very behaviour of the men and the restraint with which they spoke. He waited for someone to say something to her, to ask her some question, so that he could hear her voice. But nobody did.

He was about to go back to his place when the train gave a jerk and the engine whistled. They were off. Of course he could easily have jumped off and sprung in his carriage before the train gathered speed, but he did not want to go away, and he availed himself of the excuse to stay.

Anichka still remained silent, sitting in the corner of her bunk, just because Akimov was there. It was difficult for her to define her feelings towards him, but she always felt that she and he had some secret all to themselves, something nobody else knew about: perhaps that she had seen him crying.

Of course, he was a real hero. But so were the other men sitting there. Drozd had been behind the enemy lines several times. Firsov was an experienced and brave sapper who had risked his life a thousand times. So had all the others. They spoke to one another, recalling past battles, conjecturing aloud what was to happen to them at the place where they were to re-form—in a word their conversations were quite ordinary. But she knew that it was not poverty of intellect that made their conversation so commonplace, but the habit of restraint, reluctance and lack of practice in saying things nicely. In spite of the dark she could see every one of the men sitting there. Every one except Akimov. He seemed obscure, profound, impenetrable and different from the others. She could not realize what was wrong with her until at last a thought struck her which made her smile in the darkness: "Yes, the fact is that I like him."

Nevertheless, she tried to find out why she liked him. She came to the conclusion that what impressed her in him was the rare combination of physical and moral strength. He was a man you could rely on, with whom you would be safe against the adversities and sorrows of life. But did she not feel strong enough and capable of a great deal herself? Yes, she did, and aware that the forces latent within her were equal to his, she was driven to him by the noble and uncalculating self-renunciation that rain would feel, if it could think, as it falls on the earth.

It happened that they had been talking of Akimov just before he came. They were all full of praise for him, except Drozd, who somehow spoke of him with irritation. He said, for instance, that Akimov was conceited and coarse, and made too much fuss over his service in the navy.

The reason for this attitude was that Drozd was violently and jealously in love with Anichka and was afraid that she would like Akimov just as everybody did, including Drozd himself.

Captain Drozd was an excellent fellow, and as an officer he was efficient and brave. But he seemed to try to appear worse than he was, for he thought that a reccy man should be self-reliant and flippant. Dark-skinned like a gypsy, with sparkling black eyes, he could flare up like tinder for the slightest thing. It was only when he had a fighting job to do that he was calculating and cold-blooded. At such times Anichka really liked him. At first he had adopted with her the bantering devil-may-care attitude that he always affected, but he had immediately realized his mistake. He was struck first of all by the fact that the reccy men, tough as they were from their battle experience, did not allow themselves any loose talk or coarse allusions when the new interpreter was present. This put him on his guard. He began to observe Anichka with greater attention. He was deeply impressed by her bravery, self-reliance and absolute contempt for any form of flirting. This did not detract from her feminine charm, which worked with surprising effect on Drozd. When a shell burst near her or enemy planes approached, she would turn slightly pale and utter a plaintive "Oh, how dreadful!" but would continue her work with the same deliberation and accuracy as before.

His heart thrilled when he heard that exclamation, "Oh, how dreadful!" In fact he almost wished for a real stiff barrage just to hear those words. When she said them she seemed to him weaker, and therefore closer and more accessible.

The feeling Drozd had for Anichka made him fear Akimov. Akimov's strength was in his outspokenness. He never pretended, was never hypocritical and did not accommodate himself to people. People had to accommodate themselves to him.

Akimov was all of a piece, and yet there was something mysterious and complicated about him. He was not the rough diamond he appeared at first sight, and his directness was by no means a sign of primitiveness, but the quality of one who does not want to involve himself in any ambiguity.

Drozd, too, seemed at first sight to be a rough diamond: he told you straight to your face what he thought of you. But he only appeared to be so, and he was more aware of this than anybody else. In actual fact he was always ready to make concessions. His outspokenness was not quite natural, he forced himself to be outspoken, and it cost him an effort. He liked to be pleasant to people, he wanted them to like him, and as a result he was often insincere. That was why in his heart of hearts he considered himself to be just acting, being "diplomatic," and the thought was a constant torture to him.

Akimov was a born leader and manager of men. Drozd wanted to be a leader, he dreamed of being one; but he was too weak, too prone to fits of dissimulation and coarseness; in a word, he had no set line of action.

Drozd had not noticed anything special in Anichka's attitude to Akimov or Akimov's to Anichka. But, considering Akimov a better man than himself and Anichka worthy of only the best, he feared they would come together precisely because they suited each other.

As he sat in the dark, warm carriage and took part in the lively conversation, Drozd listened attentively for anything Anichka or Akimov would say. But they sat there without saying a word, and in their very silence he sensed an invisible link between them. But it was all so elusive that he sometimes thought that the ties between them existed only in his imagination.

But in that he was mistaken—those ties did really exist.

Akimov spoke at last.

"When I was a boy," he said, "my dream was to go on a train journey with soldiers. The jolliest thing I could think of was to be in a train with soldiers."

"No, a wicked man wouldn't talk like that," Anichka thought, listening not so much to Akimov's words as to his voice.

"But now," he went on, "I don't feel jolly at all. I'm always afraid one of the men will stay behind or take a drop too much. Generally speaking, it's better to be a ranker in the army. However hard his life is, he's well looked after. Perhaps it's not the thing for a captain to wish to be back where he started from, but honestly, I sometimes don't want to think about anything or have any responsibility for anybody."

Akimov spoke in the kind friendly tone which he always had in normal times, and he wondered how he could possibly talk of such humdrum things after what had happened an hour earlier in the little standard house near the station. "How rotten," he thought, "that a man is able to hide his ugly secrets." He was suddenly overcome by burning shame and thought that it was better not to have any ugly secrets, but that was not so easy.

"What did you think about the other day," somebody asked, "when you sent the men into the attack?"

"I don't remember."

"It's terrible sending men to an attack," Gusarov said. "You're afraid they won't go."

"I wasn't," Akimov replied. "That's a thing you just mustn't think of. If you do the men won't go; they'll feel it, and your attack will be a flop. You've got to be sure they'll all go like one man. And for that you've got to send them in at the right moment. Or it'll just be tilting at windmills. Same as in politics: you've got to give the right slogan, and at the right time."

Meanwhile Drozd was thinking: "How he can speak. Like a lecturer from the Political Department. Impressive. He knows what he's talking about."

"That's what Remizov used to tell me," Akimov added after a silence.

"He's chosen the right time to give Remizov the credit," Drozd commented gloomily to himself. "Realized that a bit of modesty does no harm. Crafty fellow, damn him."

Gusarov began to tell of an incident that was supposed to have happened in the town of Rybinsk: a front-line soldier coming out of hospital found a man he did not know with his wife and shot his wife dead. The court was said to have acquitted him on the grounds that his action was justified.

Nearly everybody present agreed with the verdict. Akimov alone said in a dull voice: "And he probably never left any girl in peace in hospital or at the front."

That led to an argument on the morality of wives back at home. Drozd argued violently with Akimov, although he knew quite well that Anichka, who was still sitting there and not saying a word, could not fail to support Akimov. His anger rose. "He's taking the women's side to please her," he thought. "Showing what a fine chap he is, sticking up for the women."

"What do you think, Comrade Belozyorova?" somebody asked Anichka.

She pretended to be asleep and did not answer. Hearing what Akimov said, she was suddenly struck with fear that he might choose as the companion of his life a woman who was unworthy of him. And the thought filled her with a strange, rending, though apparently quite unjustified, pity for him.

3

Early next morning the train stopped at a small station, and, not being able to sleep, Akimov went out on to the platform. The whole train was still asleep and only a few of the older soldiers got out and sat on the grassy embankment, smoking.

Captain Labzin came up to Akimov and immediately began to relate how his adventure had ended the day before. It had been a failure, the woman being of strict morals, but in his senseless vanity Labzin related it as if it had ended with complete success. It hurt and shamed Akimov to hear of it, and he cut in: "All right, enough of that. Let the past be. It's nothing to blather about. Poor lonely women. I'm sorry for them, that's all."

The engine gave a hoot. Labzin went to his place, the soldiers dashed to theirs, and the train started. Akimov already had his hand on the door handle ready to jump in when he saw Anichka running from the station to the train. In her hand was a mess-tin out of which milk was splashing on to the ground. She had no greatcoat on but only her olive green uniform frock with narrow shoulder tabs. She wore laced shoes instead of her top boots, and he noticed how lightly and swiftly her long shapely legs moved as she ran.

Akimov let go of the handle and stood there to see whether Anichka would catch up with the train. When he saw that she could not, he turned towards her. He could feel the train going faster and faster at his back and from each passing carriage he heard shouts: "Comrade Captain, jump in!"

He did not even turn round. He watched Anichka, who, realizing at length that she would not manage to catch up with the train, slowed down and then stood still. She put her hand over her mouth as if to stop herself from shouting, and she had such a comic expression of despair that Akimov smiled. She did not notice him until the train had gone past and he stood out against a yellow strip of standing rye.

The thunder of the train died down to a low rumble; they walked slowly towards each other.

"So you got left behind too?" Anichka asked.

"Yes."

"I'm very glad. It'll be nicer together. Do you know when the next train is?"

"I'm not sure. They say a train leaves every day."

"So we can't leave till tomorrow? Where can we stay?"

"At the station."

"I've not got a single kopeck. Have you?"

"No."

She laughed cheerfully and then suddenly became very serious. "Did you stay back because of me?" she asked.

"Yes."

They were silent. He tried to explain why he had done so. "I didn't know how you'd manage all by yourself. . . ."

"And you were sorry for me?"

"Sorry isn't the word. I just thought it wouldn't be nice to leave you alone."

"I had no idea you were so kind," she said, and there was no irony in her voice. "Thank you so much. Yes, it'll be better together, definitely."

"We'll try and get away today," he said. "Perhaps there'll be a train and we'll be able to overtake ours."

She became apprehensive.

"But I was forgetting. You can get into trouble. You've left your battalion. And all because of this milk. I got a sudden longing for milk." She looked at the mess-tin and said quite seriously, "Won't you have some?"

He laughed and so did she. Then they both became embarrassed at once, and looked round to hide their embarrassment. Rye fields stretched all around, some not harvested. Straight in front a path led through one of the fields to a birch grove that rustled and sighed in the wind. The small station consisted of a little brick house with a small balcony and the word "Blockhouse" on it, and was surrounded by old trees. On a bench near by sat a very old woman. She had two large bottles of milk. She was responsible for the mess they were in.

The first thing they did was to go to the station and ask the station-master when the next train would be. As it was not due for a long time, they went for a walk.

They went into the heart of the birch grove. It was carpeted with yellow leaves. A few faded leaves still clung to the trees and all around was beauty. They filled their lungs with the fragrant scent of autumn. Yes, it was golden autumn time and it seemed that everything in the world was as it should be: in the station building the autumn flies stung viciously, a flock of crows settled on the field and then soared upwards, cawing loudly, and crowded on the old trees round the station; bees buzzed on their flight for the last autumn nectar. All these scenes of normal life seemed something quite new to Akimov and Anichka and made them feel new themselves.

They walked slowly and in silence through the grove, taking a kind of delight in ruffling with their feet the soft thick springy layer of autumn leaves. Akimov found the silence awkward; he thought he was wasting precious time and that, if he did not tell Anichka he loved her, he ought to try to please her and entertain her, or at least to interest her somehow. He kept wondering what he could say, but could think of nothing suitable. He was angry with himself and thought ironically: "Difficult to make love, isn't it, Pavel Akimov? Takes skill. Not like fighting."

Although he did not suspect it, he was doing the only reasonable thing he could by saying nothing. Anichka was glad of his silence. To hear empty words from his lips would have been more than she could bear.

He looked out of the corner of his eye at her slender hand and slim fingers with the nails pared right down to the skin like a baby's. One hand was absently slashing at the white birch trunks with a long swish, the other was swinging the mess-tin. He should have carried the tin, of course, if only out of courtesy; but he could not bring himself to that kind of gallantry, and he was amused at the thought that as a man he should carry it for her because she was a woman, but as a captain it was not right for him to play up to a lieutenant.

He was thinking of her all the time, strange thoughts like: Is the girl walking beside me really the same one as I am thinking of? The girl he had been constantly thinking about for the last few days was far, far away—she could not be near him—while the one walking there was quite close, actually by his side. He could take the hand of the girl that was with him and talk to her, but the other one lived in a world of cloud, she reigned in his heart. Perhaps it is wonderful to have the person you love beside you because she is just like a bird that has settled of its own accord on your hand, but whose real place is high in the sky, far away from you.

Akimov was happy and Anichka could feel it. She did not feel it merely because he had missed the train for her: he had simply acted nicely—any officer or soldier who knew her could have done the same. But the important thing was that it was Akimov who had done it. Anichka was aware that only some serious reason, some exceptional case could make him do that—he was not the man to act that way out of mere courtesy.

She glanced at Akimov now and then. One of his hands, large and sunburnt, was plucking absent-mindedly at the button on his tunic pocket.

Her hand holding the swish and his hand on his tunic were quite close to each other. As he looked at Anichka's hand and at his own Akimov thought they reminded him of something, he could not recall exactly what. Then he remembered: a long graceful willow leaf by a big maple leaf. Their eyes met, they smiled and wanted to say something, but suddenly a voice came from the direction of the station, the voice of one anxiously seeking.

"Comrade Captain! Comrade Captain!"

"Mayboroda," said Akimov with a sigh.

True enough, it was Mayboroda. When the others told him that the battalion commander had been left behind he jumped from the train and ran back. He now emerged from the trees, his face gloomy as usual, his cap stuck comically on his head, and went up to his officer as though nothing had happened, pretending not to be surprised that the interpreter was there too. He had Akimov's greatcoat over his arm.

The three of them went back to the station, Akimov a little embarrassed and stern. At the station another surprise was in store for them: Biryukov and Molchanov, both from the regimental reconnaissance unit, had also left the train to bring Anichka her greatcoat. Captain Drozd had given them permission, for he was very anxious about her, they said.

So their number increased to five. They all sat down on the bench by the station, and soon the station-master and a few other railway employees came and joined them. Talk naturally turned on the war: how long it would be before it was over, whether the Germans still fought well or not so well as before, and how long it would be before the allies in the west opened the second front at last.

A band of boys gathered round them and listened to the conversation in tense silence, staring at the reccy men's strange camouflage capes—they were wearing them by force of habit—Akimov's medals and Anichka's bright smiling face.

4

The next train arrived three hours later. It was the division transport train following theirs; in it were General Mukhin and divisional headquarters staff. It was running well ahead of schedule and had almost caught up with the one Akimov and Anichka had missed. The latter were received like victims of a misfortune and were given food and places in the train.

Soldiers were singing in the carriage. The chorus leader, a swarthy sly-looking Ukrainian sergeant-major, was very excited and naively proud of his powerful tenor voice. Between the songs he would glance at Anichka and throw hints about no women's voices being heard.

"Can you have singing without a woman's voice?" he asked despondently.

Anichka looked enquiringly at Akimov and he nodded. Her way of asking for his permission instead of just singing of her own accord seemed to bring them closer together, as though she had been his from time out of mind, and it made Akimov's throat go dry. She began to sing and the sergeant-major, still singing himself, nodded with enthusiastic satisfaction.

The hoot of the engine was heard, and Akimov thought it was his love racing forward and making the quiet plain resound with its triumphant blast.

At the first station Akimov got out, telling Anichka he would be back soon. He laughed at himself like a light-hearted child and went straight to the hairdresser's. As in all places where fighting had recently taken place, the station was in ruins and a temporary large wooden building had been erected. Next to it was a wooden cabin housing the post office and a hairdresser's shop.

As he waited his turn on the platform, Akimov saw the divisional commander slowly walking up and down with some staff officers. The general called him, shook hands with him and asked when he was going to hand over his battalion. Seeing that Golovin had not had time to inform Akimov of his transfer, the general was glad of the opportunity to impart the pleasant news himself. He was rather surprised at the other's silence.

"How is it you are in our train?" he asked.

"I got left behind."

"That's a bad show. Anyhow, they'll have to get used to your absence."

Again Akimov did not answer, and the general began to feel uncomfortable at his strained silence.

The general nodded and continued his walk, and Akimov went back to the hairdresser's. He stood there until his turn came, but then he stared vacantly at a lieutenant who told him it was his turn to go in. Then he looked at the white-coated hairdresser, put his hand to his beard and said, "No, there's no need," and to everybody's astonishment walked away.

He stood a few minutes by the carriage in which Anichka was and did not get in until the train started. He sat down without even looking at Anichka and smoked in silence.

Anichka noticed this and became gloomy too. Her dejection did not last long, however, for soon she seemed to take no notice of him—she joined the soldiers and began to tell them stories about German prisoners, amusing anecdotes, mostly of Hitler and Goebbels, and episodes from the life of the reccy soldiers. She seemed to forget all about Akimov, and she cruelly underlined the fact in every way she could. The soldiers looked at her with adoring eyes. Even Mayboroda left his uncommunicative officer and went and sat down by Anichka.

Evening was falling. The melancholy blast of the engine echoed over the dark plain. The peals of laughter which occasionally rang through the carriage infuriated

Akimov. He wanted to get away from there as soon as possible and was only waiting for the next station to join some officers he knew in the next carriage.

But at the next station the train overtook the one in front and the two stood one beside the other. Akimov went out on to the platform and heard the easily recognizable voices of Oreshkin, Belsky and others from his battalion. He called Mayboroda and said, loud enough for Anichka to hear him: "We've caught up with our train. Good-bye!"

He was busy for the whole of the day the journey still lasted, talking to his men, asking them about their family affairs, reading the papers to them himself in the absence of his political assistant and holding talks on politics in every carriage. Then he analyzed the last battle with his officers, pointing out the good and bad points of each unit and the shortcomings in co-ordination with the artillery. He also made his farewell. Once he was alone he started thinking of the sea, Novorossiisk and Batumi, and tried to remember the words of command and the signals in use in the navy, the positions of ship's lights and beacons, the Morse alphabet and the service code.

He never seemed so cheerful and friendly as then, but he had never been so miserable at heart.

When Mayboroda heard of his captain's departure he gave up all his usual occupations and lay for hours face upwards in his bunk. He would snap at everybody, including Akimov. The latter shook his head, ordered the others to leave him alone and did not trouble him himself either.

Meanwhile the trains by-passed Moscow and went on along the October railway line. At night they at last arrived at Bologoye where they were to detrain. There division and regiment second echelon officers were already fussing about. Major Golovin was waiting for his units. Detraining started. Akimov went to Golovin to report his arrival and immediately asked: "Who shall I hand the battalion over to, Comrade Major?"

The latter answered curtly: "Wait, we'll decide when we're settled down."

"What is there to decide? I must go."

"There's no hurry, you can wait a day or so," the major answered angrily.

Transport came at dawn and they drove away from the station along a bumpy cobbled road. Signboards had already been put up showing each unit where to go.

Billeting officers met the first battalion as they entered a village and showed Akimov where he was to move in with his men. There were signalmen all over the place, laying telephone lines. Sergeant-majors distributed the men among the cottages. The whole population turned out to see them. Women stood by the fences, scrutinizing each face with the unspoken thought that always comes to their minds on such occasions, "Perhaps mine is among them."

On the same day Major Golovin assembled all his officers. The meeting took place in the local collective-farm club, which had been decorated with bunting and fir branches.

The officers were all in high spirits, feeling fresh in their clean uniforms and shining boots after a bath and shave. Some of them even dug up peace-time caps with cherry-coloured bands and new-looking bright yellow shoulder tabs instead of the crumpled ones they had worn in the field.

Golovin surveyed his officers with a smile of satisfaction. Reinforcements would be coming in the next few days, he informed them, and all stores and equipment, including artillery, were to be brought up to schedule. Battle and political training would start the next day. The programme and time-table were to be strictly observed, as in peace-time. The first battalion was given the job of equipping an assault course, the second and third that of setting up a shooting-range. New red-covered copies of the regulations and instructions, training programmes and time-tables were immediately distributed.

Akimov stayed behind after the conference and again asked the regiment commander: "Who shall I hand over the battalion to?"

Golovin suddenly lost his temper. "You're a heartless chap, I must say, Akimov," he said. "I know you're in a hurry to be back in the navy, but there's no need to show everybody how eager you are to get away from us. It's not tactful, honestly, it's not."

"It's not that at all," Akimov protested, perplexed. "I just want to get it over; it's no use prolonging the agony. Tell me who I can hand the battalion over to and that'll be the end of it." Then he added after a pause, "You're all like brothers to me. Yes, real brothers, and that's the honest truth. But what's the use of putting it off? I've got to go, and that's all about it."

"I saw the general today," said Golovin, softened by these words. "We've not enough officers for the time being, so you'll have to remain in command of the battalion till we get new ones. It won't be more than ten days. Then we'll give you a letter explaining what delayed you. Let's see, is there anything else? The general's put you up for the Order of the Red Banner for your fighting reccy."

"That's very kind of him. But do me a favour: let me go tomorrow."

Golovin dismissed him with a wave of the hand.

Everything was all right until evening came. But then Akimov had such a longing to see Anichka that he just did not know what to do with himself. Early as it was, he decided to go to bed. He undressed for the first time for weeks and got between clean sheets. The old couple who lived in the cottage where he was billeted at once called him their boy and did their best to make him feel at home. He had ordered Mayboroda to go to the barracks—the cottage across the road. "Get used to being without me," he had said.

So he lay there in bed, but sleep would not come. He felt miserable. He got up and dressed, read part of the regulations, put his light out again, sat down by the window and looked at the dark blue sky and the shining stars. Then he went out into the street.

It was dark in the blacked-out village, but you could feel life everywhere. Dogs were barking. Soldiers were singing. Women's voices could be heard.

He went back to his room and made up his mind to shave. He took an iron pot with hot water out of the oven, made lather and got his razor out of his suitcase. The old man came out of the little room behind the stove and watched him, trying to talk him out of it.

"Don't you feel sorry to shave off your beard, my boy? Such a fine one, good enough for a general. All generals used to wear beards. You just couldn't imagine a general without one."

His wife joined him. She watched him pitifully as he scraped off his luxuriant beard, grimacing with pain.

"Dear me," said the old woman, "why, you're quite a young feller. Your beard made you look much older."

Akimov looked in the mirror hanging beside a regular gallery of the couple's family photographs, and he was shocked to see that his face now looked ridiculously young and by no means handsome. The beard had lengthened his face and given it a noble air. Now it looked bare, his chin seemed cut short and, his moustache being shaved away, the distance between his mouth and nose seemed enormous and the nose itself stuck out of his face as lonely as a child without father or mother.

"So much the better," he laughed aloud. "The sea princess will not fall in love with me and won't draw me down to her home in the deep."

He went to bed again but he tossed about unable to sleep and was really delighted when, at about ten o'clock, there was a knock at the door. A senior lieutenant came in. He turned out to be from the political department, posted as political assistant in place of the dead Remizov. He was a spry strong young man. He sat down beside Akimov on the broad bench as near as he could to the large scorching stove.

Akimov was reserved towards the newcomer, whom he thought too unlike Remizov to be a worthy substitute for him. But it was good to have someone to whom he could talk to help him to forget the longing that was driving him out of the house.

5

Anichka felt out of spirits all these days. She thought it was all over between Akimov and her and did all she could to shake off the consternation and grief that continually oppressed her. She had no desire to know why he had been cold and rude towards her in the train. It could only be because he lacked balance and strength of will, which was quite unlikely, or because he was trying to assert his influence over her by stupid, mean, lady-killer's tricks.

But one evening when she was on duty at regimental headquarters she heard the chief of staff talking to one of the officers about Akimov's impending return to the navy, and putting two and two together she understood everything.

As soon as she came off duty next day she went without the slightest hesitation to the neighbouring village, where the first battalion was located. The village seemed deserted, the men being out on tactical training. A duty sergeant with a red arm band and a bayonet on his belt was walking up and down the street. He showed Anichka Akimov's cottage and she went there.

A grey-headed old man was sitting on the bank around the house smoking his pipe. A white cat was rolled up beside him.

"Is the captain in?" Anichka asked after greeting him. Then she added, to be more precise, "the tall one, with the beard."

"He's tall all right," the old man answered with a sly smile, "but as for the beard I wouldn't know. I didn't see one. He ain't got no beard. Of course he might have shaved it off."

Anichka sat down beside him.

"May I ask you," said the old man, "what a young lady the like of you is doing in our brave army?"

When Anichka told him she was an interpreter, he became quite interested, even enthusiastic, and began to ask her all sorts of questions about the Germans and when they thought their country would be defeated. Curiously enough it was the Germans' own opinion that interested him.

The soldiers started coming back to the village by platoons, singing. At length Anichka heard Akimov's voice in the distance and she winced at the thought that she was in love with him. Then she saw his tall figure as he approached, surrounded by the other officers, talking in a loud voice and stressing what he was saying with vigorous gestures of the right hand.

At the sight of Anichka, Akimov felt the colour ebb from his cheeks. He stopped for a moment and, silly as it might be, his first thought was how she would like him without his beard.

But Anichka did not even notice the change in his appearance. She hastily greeted the other officers and then said to Akimov:

"I heard you're going to leave us, I'm really awfully sorry about it."

"Are you?" he said, embarrassed.

The other officers felt awkward and walked away.

"When are you going?" Anichka asked.

"In a few days. As soon as somebody comes to replace me."

"Aha. I see."

"I wanted to come and see you but I couldn't make up my mind," Akimov said in a thick voice. "Mainly because I thought it wouldn't do any good and might even do harm. You can think what you like, but I'm going to tell you the whole truth. I can't live without you—I just can't." Fearing she would be offended and would treat his words as she had the reputation of treating all such declarations, he tried to tone down what he had said. "Perhaps I shouldn't have put it that way. Believe me, I did all I could so that it wouldn't come to this. The more so as I've got to go. I really love the sea and the navy. But that's beside the point: I must go. That's all I can tell you, in cold reason, so to speak. Of course it would have been better if this hadn't happened, it's not the time for it. Don't be offended, but I'm sorry I met you. It would have been better in peace-time."

She listened to that strange declaration of love with a feeling she could not define; she thought his sincerity bordered on magnanimity.

"Do us the favour of having some tea," said the old man, whom they had completely forgotten about.

They went into the cottage where the samovar was boiling on the table. The old woman greeted Anichka and they sat down to tea. Anichka was still thinking how strange Akimov's words had been: he had only spoken of himself without even asking whether she loved him. He seemed to be afraid to ask her that question, but what he feared was not to be turned down, but to hear her say she loved him. Thus understanding the reason for his fear, she felt grateful for it and she marvelled at his will power and colourful character.

She soon left, promising to return later in the evening. Then they went for a walk through the fields and sleeping villages until it was almost morning. They did the same thing the next day and the next again. It was hard for them to part. There was so little time left before their impending separation that they experienced none of the constraint and awkwardness of new-born love. They talked like a couple who had lived a whole lifetime together, laughed together over the eccentricities of relatives and expressed regret over the death of people whom only one of them had known. The little house in Zarechnaya Slobodka, suburb of Kovrov, and its inhabitants seemed as familiar to Anichka as the professor's spacious Nikolo-Peskovsky Street flat in Moscow to Akimov.

One day, when they were out walking, she stopped and said: "Why don't you ever kiss me? You don't expect me to kiss you first, do you?"

"I'm afraid," he said in a muffled tone. Then he brought his face close to hers, which was so strangely earnest, and kissed her.

The colour drained from her face and she said: "You're not all that afraid."

The whole week they felt as though they were quite alone, although there were soldiers, peasants and children everywhere.

Early on the morning of the seventh day, before Akimov went to take charge of training on the assault course, there was a knock at the door and a captain came in carrying a suitcase. Akimov's heart beat furiously. Yes, it was the new officer who was to take his place in command of the battalion. Chernykh was his name.

Akimov did not go to the training. He introduced the newcomer to his officers and soldiers, showed him round the battalion area and handed over the unit. Chernykh was a calm, observing, reserved man, with wiry fair hair always falling on his forehead. He wore the Order of Alexander Nevsky. Akimov liked him and noticed, not without jealousy, that the men liked him too.

"Fine," Akimov thought. "Now I can go."

He went to regimental headquarters. There he was congratulated by Golovin on the order which had just arrived promoting him a major.

"Have you handed over?" Golovin asked.

"Yes."

"Sit down for a while."

They both sat down in silence.

"What's your impression of Chernykh?" the commander asked.

"Excellent. He's a good officer."

"A Siberian."

"Yes, I know."

Akimov was silent for a while and then he added with a weary smile: "The men used to be proud of their commander being a sailor, now they'll boast of having a Siberian."

"Yes." Golovin smiled. "I daresay they will. That is if he turns out to be a good commander."

"He will," Akimov said. "Trust my judgement."

"It appears you don't want to go. I heard that you and Belozyorova. . . . Excuse me, you know. . . . They say. . . ."

"Oh, that's all right. The regimental commander must know everything that goes on in his unit—I don't see anything wrong in that. Yes, I admit I don't feel like leaving. I'm really in love with her."

"She's a very nice girl."

"Yes, she is."

"And pretty too."

"Yes."

"She used to be still prettier. She had beautiful long hair. But she cut it as soon as she arrived in our regiment. Rather awkward at the front, you know, with long hair; it gets in one's way. You could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard she had cut it. I felt kind of sorry for her plaits. But after all, a commander's got other things than his subordinates' hair to think of. When are you going?"

"Tomorrow, I think."

"Oh, stay on a couple of days. The navy won't sail away or the sea dry up. We'll give you a certificate to say why you're late."

"Putting it off won't make it any easier."

"No, I don't suppose it will."

After a while Golovin said with a gesture of wonder in which there was a trace of envy, "Well, I didn't think anybody'd be able to domesticate her, but you've managed it all right."

"I didn't do it. I don't know myself how it happened."

They shook hands and Akimov went to look for Anichka.

The first snow began to fall, everything was covered with a delicate fluffy white shroud in which you could easily distinguish the separate flakes. They were large frail flakes, heralding the change in the season. Still not used to the idea that he was no longer a soldier, Akimov thought it was time to train for skiing and get the men winter underwear and felt boots.

He found Anichka in the yard of the house where the regimental reccy unit was billeted. New reinforcements were lined up and Captain Drozd was having a talk with them, relating episodes from battle life and explaining how brave, sharp-witted, ingenious and politically alert reccy men must be. Anichka was standing by his side.

When she saw Akimov she understood that something must have happened and she went forward to meet him.

Drozd suddenly broke off. "That's enough for today," he said. When he had dismissed the men he went into the cottage.

Akimov noticed that the reccy officer's cheeks were pallid and sunken. But when he saw Anichka hurrying towards him he suddenly felt a pang of jealousy at the thought that Drozd was to stay there and be able to see her every day.

As soon as Anichka saw Akimov's clouded expression she understood what was the matter.

"Has he arrived?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Oh, it's all right," she said, taking hold of his hand. "Let's cheer up and not worry. What's six months or even a year to us? You know darling, I love you so much." It was the first time she had been so outspoken about her love. "Isn't that enough for you?"

No, it wasn't enough. What he needed was to take her with him. Had he been able to put her in a match box and hide her, he would have been satisfied.

They went over the fields to his village, to the house where he was billeted.

They took off their greatcoats and sat down by the stove. She packed his things in his case and they sat down again in silence by the stove. They did not take their eyes off each other. After having a meal together they went for a walk and came back again. She then went out, and when she came in she found him sitting by the table with his head hanging heavily, the same as after Remizov was killed.

She made up his bed without disturbing him. He heard the rustle of the sheets and wanted to light the lamp, for it was already getting dark. But she would not let him.

"You go to bed," she said. "I'll stay with you. I don't want to go."

He seemed startled.

"You mustn't." Then, enquiringly, "Really, you mustn't. Don't you think so?"

Her voice came low out of the dark.

"I'm not afraid of anything. We belong to each other for ever. Do you hear?"

Only a few days earlier those words would have seemed ridiculous and hackneyed even to Anichka, but today she pronounced them with as much emotion and force as if she had invented them herself and nobody in the world had ever used them before.

He put his arms around her, but as he did so his heart froze at her willingness and what seemed to him her experience. She burst into tears and sobbed in anguish, and, not knowing how to express herself, she said: "I've never done it before." He cursed himself for his contemptible distrust of her and felt himself melt with a tenderness so overpowering that he had never known anything like it. Yet even in the blaze of his passion he understood and felt that she experienced nothing but pain and perhaps the sweetness of self-surrender.

He gazed at her with endless wonder and pride and thought, "She is the one I dreamed of. Anichka. Or am I still dreaming?"

She pressed closer to him. She could think of nothing lovelier than to be beside him. What people thought the most important thing was by no means the most important, but perhaps the most difficult and incomprehensible.

After that night they spent five whole days together. He had to go, but he could no more tear himself from her than the knight Tannhäuser could part from Venus in the old German legend told by Heine and set to music by Wagner. This comparison from literature made Anichka tremendously happy, perhaps because their love and passion were none the less although everything had taken place in a little log cottage and not on a magic mountain.

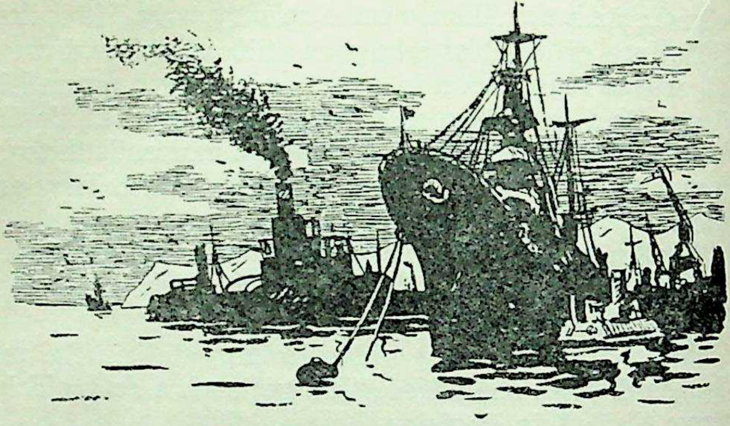
On the sixth day Akimov woke up very early. He looked at the face of Anichka who was still asleep, and went out, only to return soon in a car. Anichka got dressed in silence. They took Mayboroda with them and went to the station. There they stopped, and after a moment's thought Akimov told the driver to take them into town. They enquired where the Registry Office was.

"Shall we go in?" Akimov asked. He was very pleased with his idea and was rather astonished when he heard Anichka's answer: "Do we really need to?"

She stood in silence a while, looking at the little red signboard. Then she added, "It's got such a dull, official name: Civil Acts Registry Office. . . ."

The room they went into was small but festively furnished. A woman was sitting there, no longer young, and wearing a pince-nez. Anichka asked her whether army personnel could register marriage there, to which the woman answered, not without a certain malice, "They may if they wish."

When the formalities were over she raised her eyes, which were red, perhaps with tears, congratulated them and wished them a happy married life. They left the quiet room, in which more deaths were registered in those war years than marriages or births, and went in a solemn mood to the station. An hour later Akimov left.



CHAPTER FIVE

THE SEA

1

WHEN AKIMOV arrived in the capital he went straight from the station to the Naval Depot, a large building used as a marshalling centre for members of the Soviet Navy.

Although the building was situated in the heart of Moscow, surrounded by streets and squares and further by fields and woods and numerous other towns and villages, Akimov no sooner crossed its threshold than he got the feeling that he was already at sea. Indeed it was a large ship anchored fast to Moscow earth. Life was exactly as on board ship: piping and naval orders could be heard all day, and the very clocks were naval ones with twenty-four-hour dials.

Akimov, who was no longer used to the sea or the fleet, thought it rather ridiculous, though extraordinarily touching, to hear how seriously the inmates called a common floor a deck, a granite staircase with twisted iron railings a hatch, the dining-room the mess cabin, and the windows which looked out on to the asphalted Moscow streets portholes.

Like a man home after travelling far abroad, he found everything surprising. "God save me from pronouncing the word 'rope' here," he thought; "they'll never realize that I mean a line."

It was not until after he had handed in his "greens," as they all called army uniform, to the petty officer in the clothing stores and changed into full naval uniform, including a black cap with a crab (the sailor's name for a naval cap badge) that Akimov at last felt himself a sailor. Like any other member of the depot he even began to refer to the daily walks he had in Moscow while waiting for his appointment as "shore leave." He strolled till late at night on that endless "shore leave," going aimlessly from one street to another as though bidding a final farewell to *terra firma*. One day he stopped near Anichka's house in Nikolo-Peskovsky Street.

At last the day came when he received a posting. But what a surprise it was! He thought there was only one fleet he could be sent to, the Black Sea Fleet, and only one sea, the Black Sea. But his appointment was to the Northern Fleet, and to the Barents Sea beyond the Arctic Circle.

He took the train to Murmansk and upon arrival went straight to the port.

Everything there was of course different from the south. The granite cliffs were covered with white frost and the dark water of the bay, covered with misty vapour, contrasted with the white of the cliffs. The coast was bound with thick white ice, and the blue melancholy shadows of the polar night reigned over the bay. Still, it was the sea with its penetrating salty smell; it was a port full of transport ships, M.T.B.'s and trawlers, powerful cranes and winches, fluttering flags and fast motor launches racing over the waves in all directions.

The torpor and melancholy which had come over Akimov of late seemed to blow away and life again smiled to him in spite of the distance which separated him from Anichka.

Pushing his way among the stevedores, he looked for a motor launch to take him out to Fleet Base. His heart thumped madly as he stepped on board a ship for the first time after two years on land and saluted the naval ensign fluttering from the gaff. The launch pushed off and glided lithely between the ships. It was fairly warm. The signal masts of the shore posts and the steering beacons gradually disappeared into the haze. A destroyer sailed slowly by. "The Flag" sounded and the men on the launch faced the destroyer and raised their hands to their caps in salute. The crew of the destroyer did the same. Soon the harbour was lost in the distance. Grey waters seethed and foamed under the stern.

It was still blue twilight all round, and Akimov felt that it must get either lighter or darker. But it got neither lighter nor darker.

Soon Akimov saw the masts of a wireless station on shore and some large buildings like an amphitheatre on a hill. The launch signalled its identity and immediately the answer flashed on one of the masts ashore: "All's well." That meant the launch could enter the harbour. Slowly the boom swung open and the landing pier appeared, draped in ice. Gangways were let down from it and the men from the launch filed up them.

At Fleet Headquarters Akimov received an appointment as understudy to the captain of a submarine chaser. As he had expected, it was not considered advisable to put him in command after such a long absence from the navy. Without losing any time Akimov went to look for his ship.

The commander of the chaser was Lieutenant Badeikin, a short, stoutish, unimpressive, prematurely bald man, who had been a long-service petty officer. He looked very embarrassed when he heard why the tall broad-shouldered lieutenant-commander had come to him. Beside Akimov he looked like a shy chubby boy.

He showed Akimov over the craft and took him on to the bridge. There he introduced him to his second-in-command, Junior Lieutenant Klimashin, and the boatswain, Chief Petty Officer Zhigalo. The latter was no more than thirty years old but in his desire to look the "classical" bos'n he wore a light walrus moustache, affected a deliberate gait and gazed on the world with calm old-tar condescension in his pale, almost white eyes.

"Where have you fixed yourself up?" Badeikin asked Akimov.

"I left my suitcase at headquarters for the time being. Where do you live?"

Badeikin's answer was inarticulate and Akimov concluded that "Stumpy" was not a very hospitable sort of chap.

Badeikin started to tell Akimov of the ship's battle record. The sub-chaser had sailed twenty-seven thousand sea miles, escorted ninety-six transports, brought down three enemy planes, sunk one hostile submarine and made sixteen raids on enemy-occupied shores. For its services it had been awarded the title of guard ship. Badeikin stood to attention as though reporting to his commander and Akimov, sensing his embarrassment and wanting to dispel his awkwardness, said bluntly and with a trace of vexation: "Look here, Badeikin, don't pay any attention to my stripes. I'm here for you to train me. Size and rank are beside the point. We're agreed on that, are we?"

"Aye, aye," blurted Badeikin, still with his fingers along the seams of his trousers.

Akimov laughed heartily and Badeikin did the same. When he laughed, his flat inexpressive face looked so pleasant, witty and intelligent that Akimov understood why he had been sent to serve under that dwarf of a man. He began to suspect that even Badeikin's exaggerated respect for him and his rank was nothing but a cunning mask that his intelligence and experience prompted him to put on "just in case."

Wiping away the tears of laughter from his eyes, Badeikin asked, "Will you come with us on a mission or will you have a day or two's rest?"

"I've been doing nothing for two weeks," Akimov replied. "I'll go with you. And in general, don't ask me, order me."

The routine chores were being carried out on board the small craft. Some of the men were chopping ice from the deck, others were inspecting and manipulating the gear. Knocking came from under the water where divers were inspecting the hull. It was pleasant to hear electric bells and the engine-room telegraph ringing and music coming from the wireless cabin. Zhigalo went slowly over the deck, making everything from stem to stern fast for action. He was Party organizer, too, and as he went along he made arrangements with the sailors for notes for the next news-sheet.

All the routine bustle suddenly raised Akimov's enthusiasm and convinced him that he had been right in agreeing to take the first appointment offered him.

"This is fine, couldn't be better," he said suddenly to Badeikin's surprise. "Tell me your postal number now. I'm fed up with living without any address."

He immediately wrote a few lines to Anichka but he had no time to post them. A group of men approached the gangway, and when Badeikin saw them he said, "We'll soon be off now."

They were reccy soldiers who were to be landed in the Germans' rear. Armed with tommy guns, grenades and hunter's knives, they marched single file in silence over the deck and squatted down close to one another by the cabin. Their officer, a pale-faced man with a red scar on his forehead, went up on to the bridge, and Badeikin introduced him to Akimov: "Senior Lieutenant Letyagin."

The sailors knew all the reconnaissance men by name. They shook hands heartily with them and loud friendly greetings were heard: "Hello, Kostya!" "How are you, Petya?" "Not seen you for ages!" "Out of hospital already?"

At last they cast off. Badeikin rapped out orders. Akimov's heart started thumping. The little craft shuddered, got under way, swung round and glided forward out into the bay towards the open sea.

2

The open sea! It was a grey, unsociable sea, the Icy Sea, as it was called on maps in the time of Ivan the Terrible, but Akimov could have shouted for joy at the sight of the boundless waters and the briny waves towering one behind the other and crashing down only to gather strength and heave up again.

He felt once more the pride he had felt when young of standing on the captain's bridge with his chest against the wind. Yes, here he felt more tangibly than anywhere on land what it is to move forward in spite of obstacles and resistance. Next to him stood the helmsman, Second Class Petty Officer Kashevarov, tall and massive like himself. When Akimov looked at his tense face, he thought he saw himself when he was younger, in 1936, serving as helmsman on the Black Sea. The sudden vision made him somewhat sentimental and he glanced sideways at

Kashevarov, thinking, "How much joy and how much sorrow is in store for you! How many crests and troughs your soul will have to ride! How happy you will be, and how unhappy! What different thoughts will go through that stubborn head of yours!"

He put his hand to his pocket, in which he still had the letter to Anichka, and heaved a loud sigh. Then he laughed quietly at himself: "So you've started sighing now, have you! The sea's no place for that. The wind's fresh enough as it is."

He suddenly felt cheerful, or rather elated, because it seemed he had been in that very same place at some time he could no longer remember and had had the same thoughts and sensations as now.

The small craft was tossed mercilessly. Now and then a wave washed over the deck on which there was soon not a single dry spot. The water froze almost immediately and the sailors had to chop away the ice all the time so that it would not weigh the ship down and make it lose keel. Akimov watched them and was struck by the precision of their movements and the skill and speed with which each man did his job without waiting to be told. The more he observed the crew perform their duties, the greater was his respect for them and the more highly he appreciated the order reigning on the trim little ship.

He saw proof of the high morale, team spirit and orderliness of the crew in the way they left the dry cabin to the reccy men without any order to that effect, but simply out of sympathy for men who would have to spend many a cold, sleepless and dangerous hour in enemy-occupied territory.

Although the sub-chaser was cruelly buffeted by the waves, it kept stubbornly, almost swaggeringly, to its course.

Akimov's excitement gradually calmed down. Everything seemed easy and simple and reminded him so much of his training on the Black Sea—with the exception of the bluish twilight which seemed to come from some mysterious light hidden not far away.

The coast hove in sight, bound by rounded granite cliffs dating back to the distant Quaternary Period. They looked so barren and forbidding that Akimov could not help pitying the reccy men who were to land there.

The cliffs were all so much alike that it seemed impossible to find bearings among them. There were no landmarks, no dominating heights or patches of colour one could go by—nothing but those rounded boulders, each exactly like its neighbour, so dark that they seemed almost black, bereft of any vegetation and yet impressive in their rugged, sinister beauty.

"Varanger Fjord," said Badeikin, pointing ahead.

The coast seemed so near that Akimov wondered why Badeikin did not slow down.

"It's a long way off yet," the lieutenant said. "You'd think it was quite near, wouldn't you? You've got to get used to that here. Refraction."

When Badeikin gave orders he did not forget to explain from time to time the reason for and the importance of certain measures. This he did with irreproachable tact. When, for instance, he ordered the light to be put out in the cabin he said, as if to himself, although his remark was obviously intended for Akimov, "That's for the reccy fellows, to get them used to the darkness."

Badeikin watched Akimov and noted with a touch of jealousy that the newcomer was quite calm and that his eyes and ears missed nothing of what went on around him. "We'll see later on," he thought to himself, hoping, perhaps, in his heart to have a chance to see the landlubber lose some of his composure. He wanted to show the army officer that life in the navy was not always plain sailing and that promotion and awards were not dished out with the rations. But everything seemed to go pat just to spite him, and though glad of this, Badeikin would have welcomed some complication.

The petty officers and sailors were also observing Akimov. They knew he was only an understudy, but his serious penetrating glance had the same bracing effect on them as on everybody else: it made them want to please him and earn his approval. Badeikin sensed this too, and he was a shade envious of Akimov, above all on account of his massive figure and confident appearance.

The shore drew nearer. Lonely lights flashed here and there. Perhaps they were German coast-guards or just Norwegian fishermen plying their peaceful trade. Yes, strange as it seemed, that barren land was Norway. Akimov could hardly believe it, for, having served on the Black Sea, he considered Norway a distant land, more remote than Italy or even Africa. And yet there it was, grey, with occasional flickers of light, girt with cliffs and fjords, which by now had become invisible.

The nearer the ship drew in towards the shore, the tenser the faces of the men on board became. Letyagin kept coming on to the bridge and disappearing again without a word. The gunners took their stations by the guns. The bos'n seemed glued to his machine-gun. Some of the sailors got the gangway ready, others put on oilskins. Everything was done quickly and with the automatic precision and beauty that comes of long practice.

The white crests of the breakers could be seen along the coast. Klimashin was obviously uneasy—he checked the sounding and whispered something anxiously to Badeikin. Letyagin appeared noiselessly on the bridge, where he remained, peering at the shore and helping to navigate the ship by landmarks on the coast which were known to none but him.

At length the spot for the landing could be seen on the beam. "Helm to starboard!" Badeikin ordered. "Dead slow ahead." Akimov attentively watched the manoeuvres of the craft. Ashore all was quiet.

The reccy men came out of the cabin and stood to the left of the bridge as close to one another as though they had been all of one piece.

There was an unexpectedly thick, low mist not far from the shore. The chaser sailed into it and it covered the deck so that from the bridge above the men could be seen down to their waists, while the rest of them was hidden in a thick milky cloud: a fantastic vision of halves of men swimming in the air.

Akimov peered intently into the fog and somehow he expected that when it lifted it would disclose not the granite coast with the vague outline of the shallow creek surrounded by the white foam of the breakers, but a tiny stream and beyond it an upward slope with trenches, communication trenches and muddy gullies full of gurgling fresh water. And this strange and unexpected thought reminded him of Anichka, Remizov, Golovin, Pogosyan, Mayboroda and all his men who were so far away from the sea.

But the fog cleared as quickly as it had gathered and Akimov saw once more the deck of the small craft, the grey waves of the Barents Sea and the small creek hemmed in by granite cliffs.

"You stay here and I'll see to the landing," Akimov said to Badeikin in a tone that sounded almost like an order.

He realized that haste was necessary. They could be spotted from the shore and that would mean the failure of the whole operation. Besides, he noticed the sailors looking anxiously at the sky—they apparently feared an attack by enemy planes. To complicate the situation still more, the sub-chaser could not get close in to the shore, for the breakers threatened to throw it on the rocks. There was a gap of ten yards between ship and shore.

Without waiting for the order, the sailors holding the gangway stepped into the water, which reached above their waists. They held up the end of the gangway on their shoulders, and shouted impatiently: "Come on, get a move on!"

The reccy men approached the gangway. They could not help shuddering at the sight of the broad patch of seething icy water between the end of the gangway and the protruding rocks, the intervals between which filled with foaming water as the waves beat against the shore and emptied completely as they receded. "Shall we have to carry them then?" Akimov wondered as he watched the reccy men. Then, without further thought, moved by a variety of feelings which he had no time to analyze, he went over the gangway and jumped into the icy water. Recovering his breath which the piercing cold had taken away, he shouted: "Letyagin!"

He easily lifted Letyagin on to his shoulders and carried him to the shore in the wake of a wave. Depositing him on a large boulder, he waited for the next wave to break against the rocks and then went back to the gangway. There he took the next man on his shoulders, noting in passing that three sailors were following his example. The unusual landing was soon over. It even caused unexpected mirth among the sailors who were standing waist-deep or wading through the icy water with their live burdens. They showed flippant fearlessness in spite of the icy cold water, and short snappy shouts could be heard: "Hold on!" "Watch out, I'll duck you!" "Ugh, it's hot!"

After carrying the last reccy man, during which process he bumped his head against the man's kit-bag which was full of loaded cartridge drums, Akimov climbed on to the gangway and back on to the deck. The reccy men had already disappeared among the cliffs as if they had never existed. The vessel slipped slowly along the coast.

"Go to the cabin and get warm," one of the sailors said to Akimov. He did so and undressed quickly. It was still dark inside, but somebody groped at the portholes to make sure that they were properly blacked out, and then the light went on. It was Badeikin himself. He gave Akimov a couple of blankets. His face was very serious. He went away, but soon came back with a flask of vodka and again disappeared. Then he again came back.

"What can I put on?" Akimov asked.

Badeikin had thought of that too. He brought underwear, sailor's trousers and rubber boots.

"Will they fit?" Akimov wondered.

"I got them from Kashevarov, the helmsman."

"They'll be all right then," Akimov said with a smile.

"Well, that's your first sea-baptism," Badeikin commented.

Akimov frowned. "Call that sea-baptism? It was wet, that's all."

He was vexed with himself. He thought he should have sent the sailors into the water instead of going himself. He had acted not like an officer but like an ordinary sailor. He had been sorry for the reccy men, of course; they would have been unable to get dry ashore. But had that been his only reason? Hadn't he wanted to show Badeikin and the sailors what a daring army officer he was? It was funny that in the army he had always felt like a naval officer, and now in the navy he could not forget that he had been in the army.

Yes, there had been something of a desire to show off, to assert himself in front of his new comrades and in front of the cold, forbidding Barents Sea which was new to him too.

"If I had been in command here and not just an understudy," he said, a little embarrassed, "I wouldn't have done that. But as I'm an understudy with nothing special to do, it doesn't matter if I do a porter's job."

Badeikin did not smile, although he agreed with Akimov's remark inasmuch as it concerned him.

An artillery shot was heard outside, followed by another. Badeikin stood stock-still.

"They've spotted us," he said. "I hope Letyagin's got away. I'm going on the bridge."

He went out. The shots became more frequent. Akimov went up on deck. Gun flashes could be seen here and there along the coast.

"That's from Vardö," Zhigalo said.

A shout was heard: "Aircraft astern. Five Fokke-Wulf-190!"

Akimov had no time to admire the concision of the report before the alarm bell clanged. It was followed immediately by the boom of the guns and the clatter of the machine-guns on the sub-chaser. You could hardly tell which came first: the report of the man on watch, the clang of the alarm bell or the shooting. They all seemed to come together. Before Akimov's wondering eyes a lightning engagement took place between the five German planes and the seemingly defenceless tiny Soviet craft.

The speed of the planes was almost incredible, but the boat seemed invulnerable. In response to the hoarse, tense commands rapped out by Badeikin it performed the most fantastic figures on the tossing waves. It seemed to jump up, to leap to starboard or to port, and then suddenly to gather itself together and scuttle away astern. Sometimes Akimov was under the impression that it was not just sailing on the water, but wriggling and squirming like a snake, so unexpected and baffling were its movements.

Akimov looked at Badeikin. The short figure of the commander was unrecognizable. He seemed compressed into a ball from which protruded a head that turned ridiculously round in all directions. He kept barking out orders, comically reproducing all the movements of the boat—leaning over, stepping back, or standing still, his features distorted. Kashevarov, the helmsman, too, seemed to have ceased to be a man: he had identified himself with the helm and obeyed with the unerring precision of an automat every word of the small figure beside him. He looked neither up nor down, to the side or even forward: he just listened and executed orders.

The boat was heading away from the shore out into the open sea. This astonished Akimov, who thought it would be easier to keep out of reach of the planes near the cliffs along the coast.

Badeikin, with a self-control which amazed Akimov, remembered his understudy and half-turned towards him. "We'll have more freedom to manoeuvre here," he said.

The planes dropped a few bombs as they sheered off, but they fell where the boat had been half a minute before. Swiftness was the deciding factor. And continual anti-aircraft fire. Both machine-guns kept rattling away. Some of the cartridges were tracers and they showed the skill of the gunners, for in spite of the way the ship was tossing, sometimes almost lying on its side, the stream of tracers was always directed at the same place, up where the plane was, hardly ever falling wide. The automatic gun at the stern also fired without ceasing, and if the servers had not been seen creeping to it and away from it, one could have thought the gun was loaded for time indefinite and would blaze away eternally.

Strange to say, it was not the small craft but the German planes that took the punishment. They dived here and there, skimmed over the water with a deafening roar, spattering bullets into the sea and then disappeared behind the cliffs, only to reappear to drop another bomb or two;

but the sub-chaser was no longer where they hoped to catch it.

At length the planes gave up hope of settling the fate of the small craft and flew away with an angry throb of their engines. Quiet reigned again. The whistle of the wind and the menacing roar of the sea now sounded like the babbling of children. The bos'n left the machine-gun, went to lean over the gunwale and was sick.

It was not until then that Akimov noticed that every man, including himself, was covered with a shining coating of frozen sea water. And every object on deck with the exception of the burning hot barrels of the machine-guns and cannon was iced over and shimmered with white phosphorescent light.

3

"I'm going down below for a sleep," Badeikin said.

The astonishment of the helmsman and bos'n were not lost on Akimov. He easily guessed that Badeikin was not in the habit of sleeping at sea and obviously only wanted to give him, Akimov, an opportunity of commanding the ship by himself.

Remaining alone on the bridge, Akimov took over the craft. He soon got over his slight feeling of hesitation, as the return trip was not complicated by any unforeseen happening. The crew of the small ship unquestioningly and immediately carried out all his orders, and Akimov was glad of this, although he realized that the credit for it was not due to him. But what pleased him most of all was that, as he gradually discovered, he knew and remembered everything very well and that all the naval words of command, the regulations and customs of life at sea and the co-ordination between the different parts of the ship were by no means forgotten as he had once thought: even the smallest detail came to his mind quickly and without any difficulty, like a song which you think you have forgotten. Akimov rejoiced when he became aware of this, but he decided not to say anything to avoid giving the impression of too much self-assurance, and to study local conditions thoroughly.

The port beacons, the wireless masts and the houses on the hill came in sight. The sub-chaser tied up at the pier. Badeikin came on deck and then went ashore to report to flotilla headquarters. The duty sailor piped the evening muster and the crew formed up along the side of the ship. It was a pleasure for Akimov to watch them. Among them were many fine frank sailorly faces, and as Akimov looked at them he envied Badeikin as a man who has no family envies the father of a large, well provided-for and loving family.

The bos'n went slowly over the deck, putting everything in order. Calm set in and life returned to its usual routine.

When Badeikin came back he went on to the bridge and asked Akimov, as though forgetting that he had already asked him once: "Where have you fixed yourself up?"

"I left my suitcase at base for the time being," Akimov answered, also as if the question was being asked for the first time.

"You can come to my place if you like," Badeikin said after a pause. "I've got my wife with me. I'm a family man."

Akimov went with him. They passed the large buildings and soon found themselves in front of a small house on the hill. The lieutenant's room was well heated. On the window ledges there were all sorts of flowers in pots, among them a cactus from the distant south.

"We have our little hothouse," Badeikin said. "Of course you can't expect everything to grow well here."

A swarthy-skinned woman in a gay-coloured morning gown came in.

"My wife," Badeikin said, smiling.

She greeted Akimov in a friendly way and went to get the supper.

"I'm a northerner myself," Badeikin said. "Born in Murmansk of a family of fishermen. But Nina's from the south—Georgia." He lowered his voice. "She's homesick for the south." Then he went on in his usual tone. "I've been in this fleet ever since it was founded. Nina wasn't in Murmansk then. Are you married?"

"No," answered Akimov without thinking. Then he laughed and corrected himself. "That is, yes, I am. Just fancy, I'd forgotten. My—er . . ."—the word wife seemed so unfamiliar that he could not make up his mind to use it—"my Anichka is in the army. We've not been married long for me to get used to it yet."

What a difference there was between the calm life of the Badeikins and the events of just half an hour or an hour earlier. As Nina noiselessly laid the table for supper, the smell of soap and medicine betrayed that she was in the nursing profession. Badeikin changed his tunic for an old-fashioned morning jacket with tassels and his boots for carpet slippers. An expression of contentment that Akimov had never seen in him spread over his face.

During the meal and afterwards, as he looked through *Navigation in the Barents Sea*, Akimov observed Badeikin and his wife with great interest. Badeikin called his wife Ninusya and she called him Lyoshenka. He surprised himself thinking those names did not sound ridiculous to him as they would have done two months before. He even liked them and he would not have minded living a life like that with Anichka. If his wife, he thought, were to call him Pavlik or Pashenka in front of other people he would not object to it now as he would have done before he knew Anichka.

Continuing in this train of thought, he came to the conclusion that he would have had quite a different view of this peaceful, almost vulgar, life if he had not seen Badeikin on the bridge during the engagement with the German planes and remembered how he had spun from one side to another like a weathercock, by no means a ridiculous figure, but furious, wrathful and almost terror-inspiring. If there were an alarm now, he thought, the stumpy man would throw off his morning coat and slippers and would once more be what he was a couple of hours ago.

Next day—if you could call that interminable bluish twilight day—Akimov set out for the ship with Badeikin.

The sailors' settlement on the cliffs looked full of life and even gay. Music was blaring from loudspeakers. Children were playing in the lilac-coloured clefts in the cliffs which were spanned by foot-bridges or duck-boards. Yes, there were children there too, and everything seemed homely, comfortable and well appointed. It was not until you got down below, near the dark blue waters of the bay, that home, children, washing hanging out to dry and all the familiar human occupations seemed far away. Submarines, destroyers and motor launches glided slowly by, signals flashed and flags waved in the wind. The air was full of hooting, piping and the clang of anchor chains.

A loud shout woke Akimov from his reverie.

"Akimov! Pavel! By God, yes, it's him!"

Amazed that anybody should know him by name in that far-off region, Akimov turned round and saw the squat figure of a naval officer emerging from a group and almost running towards him. Before he could realize what was happening he felt himself hugged in the arms of the man whom he could not at first recognize. When at last he got a good look at him, he exclaimed: "Migunov! Well, well! I never expected to find a Black Sea fellow here!"

"There are plenty of us here," Migunov answered. "Lyskov, Stepanov, and lots of others. But I never expected to meet you. Well, how are you getting on?" He gave Akimov a friendly but vigorous slap on the back. "So you're a commander now, are you! Well ahead of me, by Jove!"

"I've got the army to thank for that," Akimov answered, beaming. "They promoted me to major."

Migunov took Akimov over to the other officers who were still standing there and said, "Here's my Black Sea mate, Pavel Akimov. That'll put the wind up the Germans."

When he heard that Akimov had been in the army and had only just left the front, Migunov suddenly quietened and started asking all sorts of questions about operations in the main theatre of the war. Now and again he enquired with an earnest look one would not have thought him capable of, "What's it like there? Tough?"

In all the questions Akimov could not help noticing that the sailors considered the navy as a sort of subsidiary service, while the army was the main force. This was new to Akimov, for in peace-time sailors had been inclined to place themselves high above the army. The change in their outlook was due to the course of the war; it showed what a sober view the navy lads now pressing round Akimov took of the war.

Migunov felt hurt and even angry when Akimov told him that he had been appointed as a mere understudy.

"It's always like that with those surface fellows," he said. "It's a pity you're not a submarine chap. We're not that kind. Where are you fixed up? You must get away from all those married blokes." He cast a sidelong glance at Badeikin who was standing some distance away, not taking part in the conversation. "Come and live with us, single fellows. We'll make life brighter for you!"

"You've not changed a bit," Akimov said, laughing.

He was glad to find some of his old Black Sea comrades there, and among them the unruly Lieutenant-Commander Migunov.

He promised to consider their offer, said good-bye, and went back to Badeikin.

"Do you know Migunov?" he asked him.

"A little."

"A real live wire, isn't he?" Akimov grinned.

"He's a Hero of the Soviet Union," Badeikin informed him gravely.

"You don't say so! And he says I'm doing better than him!"

Akimov went on living at the Badeikins'. Migunov often came to see him. He was a little jealous of the stumpy lieutenant and did his best to lure Akimov away to the bachelors.

"But I'm a married bloke myself," Akimov admitted with a laugh.

"You are, are you!" Migunov was amazed. Then after a sudden thought he said in a downcast tone: "All the best chaps get married. I suppose it'll be my turn soon."

Akimov spent all his time on the sub-chaser, directing training and attending all meetings and musters. He asked the sailors all they could tell him about the Barents Sea and got as much information as possible about the bays, anchorages and navigation routes.

He thought of nothing else but that—and letters from Anichka. He was in such a continual state of strained expectancy that the thought of letters from her never left his mind for a minute, no matter what he was doing. It suddenly occurred to him that he did not even know her handwriting, and he tried to imagine what her first letter would be like. Would she call him—"Darling," "Dear" or something like that? He was always fixing dates by which he was certain to get a letter from her, and he made fun of himself for the way he counted the days from the time he wrote his first letter from the base to the time she received it. As she was certain to reply immediately, her answer was bound to arrive by such and such a date. When he did not get an answer within the limit he had set, he put it down to the distance, and with an aching heart he fixed another date, always succeeded by another and yet another.

His quiet life ashore was sometimes interrupted by hunts for enemy submarines which had been discovered in the approaches to the base. After three weeks the sub-chaser made a second trip to Varanger Fjord.

This time Akimov was in command. Badeikin stayed below, coming up on the bridge only at rare intervals. The stumpy lieutenant would rub his hands and ask the helmsman or the bos'n: "Well, what do you think of my lodger? Is he picking it up well?"

"He's managing fine, Comrade Lieutenant," the helmsman replied, while the bos'n answered briefly, "He's a sailor."

That was the greatest praise you could hear from the lips of the bos'n, and Badeikin was glad of his verdict, for he had suddenly become very fond of Akimov, as is often the case with reserved and uncommunicative people.

The boat was approaching the point on the coast to which it had been directed by the operation order. There was not a sign of life on the shore. Badeikin went up on to the bridge.

"Can't you see anything?" he asked.

"All's quiet," was Akimov's answer.

They waited for about forty minutes, drifting along the coast. Not a word was said.

At length Akimov became impatient. "Perhaps I should go and look for them?" he suggested.

"No," Badeikin answered vigorously. "We've no order to that effect."

They were almost on the point of leaving when the long-awaited flares—three green and two red—appeared in the sky much farther south. Then firing was heard from the same spot.

"Full speed ahead," Akimov ordered.

The firing became heavier. Every man on the sub-chaser was at his battle station. The craft made for the shore and Akimov ordered the signaller to give the agreed signal—a series of red flares. The immediate result, as Akimov had expected, was to draw fire on the ship. The bos'n, who was ready at the machine-gun, immediately fired back. A gull soared screeching into the sky.

A hoarse shout was heard from the shore quite near, "Here we are, boys!"

The gangway fell on the rocks with a dull thud. The machine-guns fired away as fast as they could.

"Come on, hurry up!" said Akimov in a low voice from the top of the gangway.

The reccy men were moving very slowly. They were carrying something on their shoulders, but Akimov had no time to find out what it was; he had to direct the fire from the machine-gun and the sailors' tommy guns against the invisible enemy firing from under the cover of the cliffs.

"Everyone here?" he asked the reccy man who came last, facing the shore and shooting as he backed towards the boat. "Yes," he answered, looking round and lowering his carbine.

The gangway was drawn up. Not until the sub-chaser was two cables' length from the shore, did Akimov give the order to cease fire.

The craft turned for home. The reccy men disappeared below deck, the cabin being left at their disposal as usual.

Letyagin soon appeared on the bridge and greeted Akimov.

"Glad to see you," Akimov answered. "How did it go off?"

"Pulled it off all right," Letyagin answered, "but look. . . Chief Warrant Officer Khramtsov lost his life. He was a fine reccy chap. I decided to bring his body with us and bury him in his native soil so that the enemy wouldn't maul him. We could have buried him among the Norwayers." (He always called the Norwegians "Norwayers.") "They're a fine lot; they hate the Germans and take in our people who escape from German camps. Yes, we could have buried him there, but we were on our way back, so we decided to bring him with us. Good people, though, the Norwayers, they helped us a lot." He was silent for a while and then he went on in a livelier tone. "We did the job very well. First class. We've got reports that will be very useful to headquarters, very important stuff." He smiled wanly. "Thanks to your lucky hand."

"Or rather my lucky back," Akimov returned with a sad smile. He felt sorry for the dead man, although he had not known him.

Letyagin seemed reluctant to leave the bridge, he evidently wanted to say something. In a voice that grew stronger all the time, as though thawing after the many cold nights ashore, he told about the Norwegians, praising them and at the same time reproaching them for not being active enough in the fight against the invader.

On arriving at base Akimov went ashore with Letyagin. The latter invited him to his room, but, although Akimov had a liking for the reccy officer, he invented a pretext to refuse his invitation and hurried to flotilla headquarters to see if there were any letters for him. There was one from Kovrov, from his mother, but none from Anichka. He was astonished and disappointed, for he thought he should have received a letter by that day at the latest, even if something had prevented her from answering his letter within a week after receiving it.

Yes, even if she had waited a week, if she could have held out that long before answering his first letter, her reply should have arrived by now.

On the way home to get dry and have a meal, he thought of the domestic comfort and mutual affection in which the Badeikins lived, and turned back. That comfort and affection irritated him now.

"That's the way it is," he murmured, pacing the deck. "A wife can find herself another man, but a mother never forgets her son. Others knew that before you, now you know it too."

He had rarely written home of late, and now the aching grudge he held against Anichka, together with the pricking of his conscience at forgetting his father and mother, aroused in him a bitter feeling that made him desperately wretched. He went down into the captain's cabin and wrote a letter home. He found solace in the thought of the house where he was born, his mother, father and sister. "I've got them," he thought to himself. "Nobody'll take them away from me."

Then he went up on deck again. The men were having dinner in the cabin. Their merry voices could be heard and soon Kashevarov started singing. Zhigalo and Klimashin were standing on the fo'c'sle among the cables, the former smoking and talking in a low voice:

"She got to know some American. 'I love you, I love you,' he said, but she just giggled. Then he said, 'Will you accept a present from me?' and he gave her a silk stocking, just one, mind you. She burst out laughing and asked what he expected her to do with one stocking, and didn't he know she had two legs. 'You'll get the other one after,' said he. She was a lively bit of stuff, and she spat in his face. He kicked up a hell of a row and even went to the town commandant to complain that she had insulted him."

Zhigalo laughed mirthlessly.

"A mean lot," said Klimashin shaking his head in disgust.

"Want-anies," said Zhigalo.

That was a name that Murmansk people had given to the Americans who used to stand in side streets selling silk stockings and cigarettes. "Want any?" they'd ask. That short phrase, pronounced in a casual undertone, could be the trade mark of all speculators the whole world over.

Klimashin went away and Zhigalo was left alone; he started muttering to himself and coughing. Then he noticed Akimov.

"Are you still here?" he said in surprise. "I thought you'd gone."

"No, I'm still here," Akimov answered. Then he asked, "Was it hard for you to get used to it up here?"

"No. Service is service wherever you are. The place seemed rather dull at first, of course—not much beauty in it, rather rugged. Then, when I got used to it, it didn't seem so bad: In fact I took quite a liking to it." He looked rather searchingly at Akimov and asked, "What about you? Don't you like it?"

"I don't mind it, it's all right," Akimov answered hastily. Then looking at the angry waves he added, "Rotten weather."

Zhigalo sighed as in a dream.

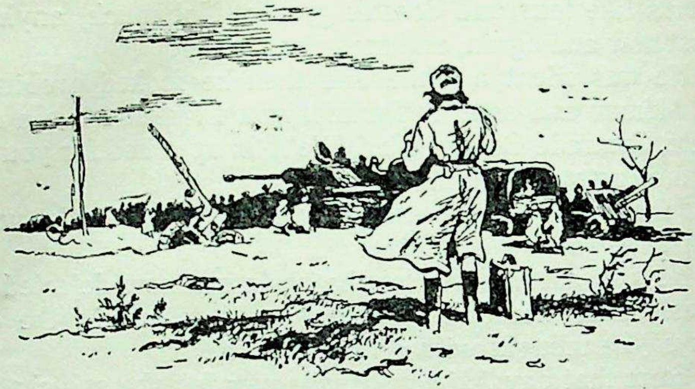
"There was a time," he said, "when we sailed only in good weather. Now it makes no difference what the weather's like. Do you think I'd have gone out in a gale with a cockle-shell like this in peace-time? No fear! But now we do. And we're still afloat! You'd think the ship itself could understand there's a war on. And what about the men? No off-duty sentiment for them now. Each one works like four and doesn't grouse. Not much, anyhow. Just now and again, and mostly at Hitler."

He was silent a while and then he looked probingly at Akimov and asked: "Perhaps you'd like to have a rest here, Comrade Commander? We'll fix up a bed for you . . . and bring you something to eat."

"That'll be fine," Akimov said. "Yes, that's what we'll do."

He was ashamed to let the bos'n see how dejected he was. "That wouldn't have happened to me in the old days," he thought with angry surprise.

From that day Akimov hardly ever left the sub-chaser. In reply to Badeikin's pressing questions he said he wanted to get the run of things and talk to the sailors; that was all so useful to him. Badeikin took it to heart, but he did not object.



CHAPTER SIX

SEA AND LAND

1

"No OFF-DUTY sentiment." Although Zhigalo had not meant them that way, those words sounded like a reproach to Akimov. They rankled with him and he tried to think less of Anichka. As he had still not heard from her, he fixed himself a limit, the very last one, he said to himself, and then he would try to forget Anichka, and root the thought of her memory from his heart. That, of course, was impossible and he did not mean it literally. But he felt certain that he could confine her memory to the very depths of his heart and stifle it with other thoughts and other memories, above all with the job in hand.

He decided on New Year's Day, 1944, as the final limit.

The night before, while the whole settlement on the cliffs was getting ready to usher in the New Year, the supply officers issuing vodka, the women baking cakes, the children decorating tiny arctic fir-trees with toys of their own making, Lieutenant Badeikin's ship was ordered out to sea with a convoy of ships. With ill-concealed disappointment hundreds of sailors raced down to the moorings.

Flotilla headquarters had decided that Badeikin would remain ashore and his understudy would take sole command of the craft during the operation. This fitted in with the short lieutenant's wish to see the New Year in with his wife, but he was nevertheless anxious and could hardly imagine his ship putting to sea without him. It was with uneasy and longing eyes that he watched it disappear with the others in the darkness.

The detachment was ordered to meet an American convoy out at sea and escort it to Murmansk.

The darkness made it impossible to distinguish the other ships, but there was no feeling of loneliness; on the contrary, there seemed to be no room to manoeuvre in. Now and then signal lamps blinked in the dark and the wireless operator received messages from the convoy commander and passed them on to Akimov on the bridge. Towards midnight the clouds cleared away and the sky was lit up with the glow of the northern lights. Akimov took up the megaphone to wish the men on deck a Happy New Year and then wished those below the same through the communication tube. Greeting signals flashed from ship to ship.

"Smoke astarboard. Two five," a signaller reported.

The American convoy hove in sight. It consisted of about twenty ships of different tonnages, flanked by grey low-lying naval units.

The sailors recognized some of the foreign ships. "There's the *Lady Jane*," said a signaller. "And that's the *Golden Stella*," said Kashevarov, jerking his chin in the direction of the American ships, for his hands were engaged.

Soon figures could be distinguished on the merchantmen. Standing on the decks of their ships, which were as high as four-storey buildings, they waved their caps to the approaching Soviet escort.

Our destroyers, submarine chasers, escort ships and trawlers slowed down and formed up in the order already agreed upon. Akimov's place was on the extreme port side of the convoy. After a complicated manoeuvre the convoy headed for Murmansk. Progress was slow, for the speed of the convoy had to be adapted to the heavy merchantmen.

When Rybachy Peninsula lay on the beam like a sparkling snow-covered mountain rising out of the dark waters, a periscope appeared for a second on the waves about three cables' length to port and then disappeared. Akimov and his sailors spotted it.

Not a second could be lost. "Attack. Full speed ahead," Akimov ordered. "Prepare depth charges." Then as the ship raced to the spot where the periscope had submerged, he remembered to have the signal hoisted on the mast and flares fired as agreed. Depth charges were dropped and huge columns of water rose at the stern of the ship, first lead-grey and then clear green.

The chaser swung round and went back until the merchantmen and naval units were once more on its bows. The sky was lit up with white alarm rockets. Then flares soared over the peninsula, making it as light as day. On the deck of the nearest American ship excited figures could be seen running about.

"It's all right, old girl," Akimov muttered as if to reassure the American ship. "We'll see you safe out of it." Hate for the enemy lurking in the silent waters filled him, mingled with maddening anxiety for the foreign ships whose cargoes were vitally necessary to Major Golovin; Mayboroda, Faizullin, Vytyagov, Filkov and Oreshkin. And Anichka too! The alarm bell was still clanging madly. "Ready!" Akimov ordered and another batch of depth charges went overboard. Emerald cascades once more rose and fell astern, and on Akimov's order the craft swung round and headed for the open sea. Klimashin stood by on the stern ready to let go another series of depth charges. He shouted something. The Asdic operator shouted from below in a choking voice: "Screw on port side. One three five."

More depth charges were dropped and the submarine chaser again swung round. Two others were approaching, ordered by the convoy commander to help Akimov. They were quite near when one of the sailors lifted a beaming face towards the bridge and suddenly cheered.

Not far away, on the seething, billowing surface of the sea a narrow strip of oil spread slowly over the water. "Hurrah!" came the same voice in a shout of triumph.

There was, of course, a possibility that the German submarine, in an attempt to escape, had pretended to be put out of action by discharging oil on the surface. Akimov would willingly have mounted guard a whole week there to finish it off or make sure that it was already sunk. But he was ordered to return to the convoy and he did so, leaving two other sub-chasers to patrol the spot. He consoled himself with the thought that he had spotted the submarine and that owing to his prompt action it had not been able to fire its fatal torpedo.

After escorting the convoy to Murmansk, Akimov returned to base with the other naval units. His craft tied up at its usual moorings near other sub-chasers from the escort.

Just then the fast little naval post launch, recognizable by its gay green colour, appeared in the bay. It signalled the sub-chasers: "Post for you. May I come alongside?" On all the chasers the sailors turned out on deck to wait for the mail. Meanwhile, Akimov was telling Badeikin about the adventure with the enemy submarine. He did not stint the details, and yet his whole attention was concentrated on the packet of letters, some in coloured envelopes, others just white triangles, which the bos'n Zhigalo was handing out. Soon there were only five left, then two, and finally one. This Zhigalo turned over in his hands with a grin, then he tore it open and started reading.

"That's all," said Akimov.

"Well done, Commander!" Badeikin exclaimed. "A jolly good piece of work!" His eyes were gleaming with pleasure.

2

A senior lieutenant with a broad, high-coloured face and blinking, short-sighted eyes came aboard the submarine chaser. "War correspondent Kovalevsky," he said to Akimov. Then he took out his notebook and immediately started asking about the sinking of the German submarine.

"It wasn't sunk at all," Akimov answered gloomily.

Completely taken aback, Kovalevsky cast a plaintive look at Badeikin. "What do you mean?" he asked. "They told me at headquarters. . . ."

"Headquarters doesn't know for sure, only the Germans do," Akimov retorted.

But it was not so easy to get rid of Kovalevsky. In the end Akimov had to tell him all about the operation. Badeikin took him and the correspondent to his cabin. He did not agree with Akimov's modesty and he kept repeating to Kovalevsky, "Write it down, write it down."

Kovalevsky had a gift for making people speak. In particularly difficult cases like this, when people refused to say anything, he affected a hurt and helpless expression that made one think it a sort of crime not to say all one knew.

Kovalevsky loved the sea and sailors to distraction, and he was even slightly ashamed that he was only a correspondent and not a fighting officer. When speaking to ill-informed people in Moscow he tried to give them the impression that he was a sea-going officer in some ship's crew. This he did, not because he was deceitful by nature, for on the contrary, he was a very honest man, but out of a sort of vanity. In his heart of hearts he thought he was a born sailor and that it was only an unfortunate concourse of circumstances that had condemned him to live ashore. He had all types and classes of naval units at his finger-tips and kept an accurate account of all German, British and American battleships, aircraft carriers or cruisers built or sunk. He rarely spoke without using some naval terms such as beams, coamings or hull.

He had a whole collection of stories about the battle records of submarines, torpedo boats and destroyers, and knew by sight every Northern Fleet officer or sailor who had distinguished himself in any way.

"So I have made your acquaintance now," he said to Akimov. He would have liked a chat with him, but he was embarrassed by Akimov's stern, tense expression, and he could see that his mind was far away. He said good-bye and went ashore.

"What about you?" Badeikin asked Akimov. "Come to my place. We kept some New Year cake for you."

"Really, excuse me, Badeikin, but I can't," Akimov said, looking away. "I promised to go and see Migunov."

He actually did go to Migunov in the submarine men's billets, though a minute earlier he had had no intention of doing so.

Migunov had been back from patrol about two hours. His submarine had damaged a German destroyer of the "Leberecht Maas" type and had then got into hot water herself: three enemy storm boats had attacked her with depth charges.

"We only just managed to escape," Migunov said. "They were after us for a good two hours. I really thought we'd had it. The Fleet Commander himself has just been to see us. 'Our planes reported the destroyer sunk,' he told us. There'll be awards for it. I'm glad you've come, Pavel. Let's have a drink to raise your spirits, you look so down in the mouth since you've been with that Badeikin. You've got a face like a prison gate, really."

"I suppose the Germans are feeling in the pink," Akimov said; "they think they've sunk a Soviet sub. I bet their headquarters are making out reports, their correspondents writing articles. . . ."

"And here we are having the fun of our lives!" Migunov broke in. He found the idea very funny indeed.

He went to call his comrades. The table was quickly laid. The submarine men spoke of nothing but the latest operation, and naturally could not refrain from a measure of boasting. A fair-headed lieutenant tried to convince Akimov that the submarine crews were the most important men in the fleet, those who inflicted the greatest losses on the Germans. Akimov was weary and he did not object but teased the submarine men: "And what about destroyers? Aren't they any use?"

The submarine chaps had no objection to destroyers, but they still insisted that the submarines topped all other units. Again Akimov did not contradict them but immediately asked: "And naval aviation? Not worth much, eh?"

They gave aviation its due, but still without prejudice to submarines.

Akimov drank a lot, but it had no noticeable effect on him.

Migunov suddenly got sentimental. He cast a fond, admiring glance all round and said: "What fine fellows you are, all of you! But him,"—pointing to Akimov—

"he's my best pal! He'll show you all yet! I know him all right. Pavel, you're a wonderful fellow! You've only got one defect—you're not a sub-chap. Here's to Pavel Akimov!"

They all seconded the toast and then agreed to go to the Naval Club.

The gay company put on their coats and went out. On the way they were surprised by a polar blizzard—a cloud of granular snow in which you could hardly see a man walking by your side. One cloud would blow past and you would think there hadn't been any snow at all, and then suddenly another would come along.

The strains of a waltz could be heard in the distance. Akimov suddenly pictured Anichka going along the ravine near Orsha on that dark autumn night, guided by the music from his dug-out. For an instant he felt a strange sensation, as though he were Anichka going along in the polar night to where the waltz was playing, and Akimov was perhaps waiting for her.

Then the fantastic sensation melted away, he could no longer feel the girl he loved so near to him. Instead, he was assailed by despair and doubts of himself and Anichka. He felt convinced that he was the victim of a terrible misfortune, that Anichka had completely forgotten him. He rather naively tried to imagine why. You could not expect anything else, he thought. He had once believed she would always remember him and love him; but that had only been a stupid illusion like that of the alchemists of old who claimed they could imprison the rays of the sun in a glass jar.

If she could fall in love so quickly with him, Akimov, what was to prevent her from falling in love with someone else?

There were plenty of other decent chaps. Take Captain Chernykh, the new first battalion commander. The men liked him, so did the officers, and so did Golovin. Chernykh was nice-looking, quiet and reserved, adroit and smart in his movements, not clumsy and reckless like he. The more Akimov considered the matter, the more he was persuaded that Captain Chernykh, and Captain Chernykh alone, was worthy of Anichka's love.

"Still we're husband and wife," he argued indignantly. But then he laughed at the idea. What use could it be to him that somewhere, almost on the other side of the globe, Anichka's name and his were written side by side in a big official register? What could the middle-aged woman with the pince-nez, whose hand had trembled a little as she wrote those two names, do about it?

Akimov felt himself torn by grief and he whispered through his clenched teeth to the wind and snow that prickled his face like hail: "Harder, harder! What can you do with a fool but hit him!"

Then he realized what a vapid mood he was in. With his usual lucidity he reasoned that it was fatigue and the vodka that had brought it on, and he soon pulled himself together.

"How are you there?" he shouted to Migunov. "Still alive?"

"Alive and kicking!" Migunov shouted back, his voice muffled by the howl of the wind and the whistle of the frozen snow around them.

"Thank God for that! I was wondering why I couldn't hear you. It's not like you to be silent. What about a song?"

"Suppose some senior officers hear us? They'll say we're drunk."

"Well, d'you think we're sober? Of course we're drunk! Mustn't deceive your seniors. . . ."

They all burst out laughing. The sound of the waltz got nearer. At last they could see a large building with its steps covered with fresh-fallen snow, the undisturbed surface of which made one think the building was deserted.

But it was full of people. Its soft carpets and wainscotting were flooded with the calm, even glow of electric lights. There were not only naval and naval aviation officers there, but a fair number of women too, doctors, communications personnel and officers' wives. The women, many of whom wore silk evening dresses, sat in a group by the wall and looked at the officers, some whispering not too flattering remarks which made the others titter. The whole scene was very much like the one in any naval club in more southern climes and less troubled times.

Dancing started again. The long robes whirled round the shapely legs of the dancers gliding over the floor. Some of the sailors twirled their partners round with the tense expression of a man performing some not very pleasant but unavoidable duty. Sometimes the glowing face of one who had already indulged in a little more drink than usual flashed past, making almost superhuman efforts to look serious but breaking into a half-apologetic and half-mocking grimace as its eyes met those of some onlooker. "Of course, it's stupid," it seemed to say, "but what can you do about it, old fellow?"

Everything would have been just like peace-time had it not been for the authoritative voice of the duty officer who now and then showed his dispassionate face in the doorway and shouted terse orders: Lieutenant Somebody to go to his ship; Commander Somebody else to report to the commanding officer, Ship's Surgeon So-and-so wanted in the sick bay, or even whole crews to report to their ships or submarines. Sometimes so many were called out at once that the hall suddenly seemed half empty. Those called away left their partners in the middle of a step and disappeared instantly. Women would stand there for a second with one arm poised in the air where their partner's shoulder had been, the languid, slightly tipsy smile still lingering on their faces; then they would unobtrusively slip away to their seats by the wall and listen to something outside, as though anything could be heard above the howl of the wind and the roar of the breakers.

As he watched this scene Akimov suddenly wondered, "Perhaps Anichka has been killed or wounded?" He found it strange that the thought had not occurred to him before, and he could not imagine why he had felt no concern on this score. He had thought of all sorts of other things but had never dreamt that anything could have happened to Anichka. "It's impossible," he reassured himself. "Golovin would have let me know." Then he shuddered to think how utterly helpless he was. There was nothing he could do—neither go to her, call her to himself, nor even send her a telegram.

Migunov interrupted his gloomy thoughts. The indomitable submarine officer had danced till he could dance no more with a charming girl in the medical service. He now came up to Akimov and whispered in his ear: "Pavel, let's go to Valya's, there are some splendid girls there."

Akimov shook his head and went to the library where it was quieter, although full of people too. He read the paper and then decided to write to Anichka.

"Dear Anichka," he wrote, "I am writing again though I do not hope for a reply. I should have given up writing to you long ago, but every day, as soon as I have a minute to myself, I just cannot help writing to you. I feel so miserable without you, although, to tell you the truth, I never believed one could love somebody so much as not to be able to spend a day alone. I try to remember everything I see which could interest you at all, so as to be able to tell you about it. I have never felt this way before. I try more than ever to understand myself, to get to the bottom of my thoughts and actions, and when I come across some clever thought—I do get some now and again—I try not to forget it so that, when we see each other again, I can tell you as if it had just occurred to me, to show you how clever your husband is. I just don't know why I am writing all this now, you'll probably only laugh at me. There was a time when I could not understand how you fell in love with me, but now I can't make out how you can forget me."

When he had finished his letter he rose to go. In the hall he heard the peremptory voice of the duty officer: "Commander Akimov, report to headquarters."

At first he thought there must be another officer with the same name as himself, for he could not imagine anybody wanting to see him. Then he saw Migunov running to him.

"They're calling for you," Migunov said hastily. "Come, I'll take you there in case you can't find the way."

Akimov felt his heart warm to his friend, for he understood that it cost him a good deal to give up dancing and his Valya to help a pal.

"It's all right, old man," he said, "I'll manage. You just go and dance."

He pushed him back into the dancing hall, put on his coat and went out into the darkness where the wind was still howling.

It was he that was wanted all right. He was received by a rear-admiral and given a new appointment in command of a submarine chaser, larger and better armed than the one Badeikin commanded.

He felt awkward at the thought of Badeikin. It seemed to him that Badeikin was being slighted while he, Akimov, was promoted to a higher post than he deserved. He even ventured to say so, but the rear-admiral answered sharply, "We know better."

Later, as he approached the pier where Badeikin's craft was tied up, Akimov realized how hard it was for him to leave it. From the sub-chaser he could hear the coarse voice of Zhigalo and a song sung by Kashevarov.

"Our proud Varyag to the foe will never surrender," the song said. And although the name "proud Varyag" sounded rather bombastic for a tiny craft which did not even have a name, but only a number, it did not awake any feeling of irony in Akimov at that moment; he even seemed to find the words of the song quite appropriate for the sub-chaser and its commander.

He took over the ship that was to be "his own" and then went to say good-bye to Badeikin. But by that time Badeikin's ship had put out to sea, and there was nobody in the little house on the hill. Akimov found the key in its usual place, packed his things and went out, closing the door and putting the key back. As he went away he cast a farewell glance at the flowers in the window and said aloud: "Good-bye, Badeikin. Good-bye, Nina." Then he set out for his ship.

"Ten-shun!" shouted someone as the new commander came on board. The sailors all stood motionless. Akimov's eyes travelled over them and then he saluted the Soviet naval ensign and his crew. His personal worries and hopes, he thought, were now a thing of the past. As he looked over the dark waters of the bay he said good-bye to his dreams of happiness, which seemed so petty to him now. He gave the order "Stand at ease!" and went up on the bridge.

3

Anichka had not answered Akimov's letters because there had been great and sudden changes in her life. Besides, being no longer with her regiment or even in the army, she had not got his address. As for Captain Chernykh, she did not even know him and probably could not remember his name or what he looked like. She would have been absolutely stupefied had she known that Akimov was jealous of a man like him, who was absolutely nothing to her.

Akimov had not been gone two weeks when the regiment was re-formed in the Bologoye area. Anichka had by then received two letters which Akimov had sent from Moscow, but as his address at the Moscow Naval Depot was only a temporary one, she could not answer him. He himself had advised her not to write before getting a permanent address from him.

On November 1, the regiment was ordered to stand to. It entrained with other regiments and was rushed to the south—often with an engine in front and one behind. On November 3, they detrained near Kiev, capital of the Ukraine. From there the division and a number of others marched westwards and joined up with the First Ukrainian Army, which had been ordered to deliver Kiev.

From the very beginning of the campaign one could feel everywhere the tense, feverish expectation that precedes battles in a great thrust. Planes were nearly always to be seen fighting overhead, for the enemy air force constantly shadowed our army, straddling it with bombs and machine-gun fire to delay the attack and make it less resolute and effective by terrifying our troops. The autumn rains made the roads almost impassable, and often enough vehicles had to be man-handled out of the mud. Major Golovin, who was riding on horseback, was dismayed at the gradual disappearance of the smartness and contentment with which officers and men had left the rest area in the rear.

But we were on the advance, and in spite of the bad roads and the continual alarm it was encouraging to see the mighty tide of our troops and equipment and the number of knocked-out German tanks and vehicles abandoned by the roadside, some still burning.

The regiment reached the Dnieper as the crossing started under heavy bombing and artillery bombardment. The high hills on the opposite bank were yellow with autumnal foliage and black with fire-gutted buildings of Kiev.

Neither the ear-splitting roar of battle nor the loud excited cries of thousands of men could ruffle Anichka's amazing calm, and her attitude inspired those around her with confidence. Armoured units who drove past, and the men standing in the open turrets of the tanks waved to her and kept looking back at her until they disappeared into the raging hell on the far side of the river. It was so amazing to see a girl marching along in front of a dozen unshaved silent reccy men in camouflage capes that passing soldiers from other divisions shouted friendly, sometimes ambiguous, remarks. The reccy men silenced the latter type of remark truculently: "Enough of that! Get along before you get your mug bashed!"

The effect of that threat was immediate: the soldiers would quicken their step, still more astonished by the respect for the girl and the determination to defend her that they detected in the reccy men's voices.

Artillery thundered without stopping and hundreds of red-starred planes swooped from all sides over the opposite bank, dropped their bombs and then flew back. The next day was a solemn occasion—the twenty-sixth anniversary of the October Revolution—and this circumstance made the battle for Kiev still more significant and awe-inspiring.

During the crossing Anichka suddenly felt unwell: her face turned pale and she became dizzy. She did not pay much attention to this at first, attributing it to fear of death which was continually hovering over the heads of the thousands of men on the assault bridge. But a few days after the battle for Kiev, she suddenly realized with alarm what it meant.

Strange to say, she was utterly bewildered. Although she was no more of a simpleton than anybody else, she found it incomprehensible, not to say stupid and monstrous, that the few nights spent with the man she loved in the little village near Bologoye station on the October railway line—nights which had not been all pleasure to her—should have caused a new life to bud within her. Then she adopted a rather flippant attitude: when the baby was born, she thought, she would leave it with Aunt Nadya and go back to the army. But she realized that that was nonsense: she could not leave her baby with anybody, for it had to be fed, brought up and educated. It was not a kind of toy, but a human being, a child, *her* child. "My child," she repeated to herself, laughing, hardly able to believe it. In her unbounded, though perhaps understandable, simplicity she wondered how it could have happened so quickly. The normal thing, she had thought, was for children to come only after a long quiet spell of married life.

As she went with the reccy men along the road to the front, which was crowded with soldiers and vehicles, she overcame her nausea and managed to control her excitement. She was thinking about herself all the time. She did all that was expected of her, but when she looked at the men around her she felt somehow cut off from them all by some invisible but insuperable barrier resulting from the state she was in, the state of motherhood. They seemed so remote and she looked at them as if from afar, as something belonging to the past. A new interest forced itself on her in place of all her previous interests, and the secret that she held set her, she thought, below everybody else, below all those whose life had broader aims and more important worries.

At night when she lay down in a tent or in the cottage which had been allotted to her, she did not sleep, but listened to the voices of the soldiers talking about the war and about victory. She could have wept when she realized that those topics, now so important to everybody else, seemed somehow secondary and remote to her.

She could not make up her mind whether she should tell what had happened to her or just let events take their course until the obviousness of her condition made explanations unnecessary.

What made her most unhappy was that she soon began to feel for the child growing inside her a strange anxious pity that made her cautious, slow and deliberate in every movement; she even refused to ride a horse, which greatly surprised everybody, for she had formerly known no greater pleasure.

During the battle for Korosten, Major Golovin was wounded in the leg. Anichka went to pay him a visit at the cottage where he was staying. She sat down beside him, and he told her that he would remain at his post and would not go to hospital. At that she suddenly burst into tears and asked, "And what am I to do?" Then she told him everything.

The major was more embarrassed than she was. "Well," he muttered, "what can we do about it? Nothing...." He thought for a moment and then said: "A pity we haven't got Akimov's address. I'd send him a telegram congratulating him."

"It all happened so suddenly," she said. "It's not right, somehow."

"But what can we do about it?" Golovin asked. And again he answered: "Nothing." He looked at her face and suddenly took up her defence with great feeling. "Why do you take it like that? There's nothing wrong about it. It's not as if it was just—a chance meeting. Everything's all right. You must get demobilized and go to Moscow to do your duty as a mother. It's a serious business, you know. If you look at it the right way, Comrade Belozyorova, it's a state affair to have children, and a very important one too." He paused a while and then continued, affecting a certain roughness: "I'm glad about it, really; I was always afraid you might be killed. What would I have said to Akimov?"

Both of them were silent for a long time. Two soldiers could be heard talking outside.

"Don't talk to me about your Reinettes and Shafrans," one of them said. "In my opinion there's no apple to beat an Antonovka."

The other answered in a gruff voice, "You were never in the Crimea—that's why you think so much of your Antonovkas."

"I've got two children too," Golovin said slowly, "they've been evacuated to Ulyanovsk. A girl and a boy. Katya and Vanya."

His voice trembled, and for the first time Anichka saw the commander moved and anxious.

"It's nerves," he said, turning away.

In a few days Anichka got her demobilization papers and went to the farm where the reccy section was located to bid them farewell. But she found out that while she had been at headquarters the order had come for them to go forward. There was nobody left at the farm.

The regiment stretched along the yellow road, men, guns and vehicles slowly moving westwards. Soon Anichka was alone at the edge of a pine-wood. Soldiers streamed past and she felt as if everybody and everything, even the woods and fields, were moving to the west and there was no reason in the world to go east.

"Good-bye, comrades!" she said through her tears. Then she shouldered her suitcase and set off eastwards.

A little farther back from the line columns of cars were driving, some east, some south, some north. Military motor roads with traffic control points and controllers and rest cottages radiated in all directions; the railways were again seething with activity; train after train full of troops was running calmly towards the west, bound for the frontier. Others were loaded with bread, shells, boxes of *makhorka* and cases of cartridges. Field kitchens, consignments of puttees, winter caps and warm underwear, field bakeries, burial squads and hospital evacuation buses, all were streaming along. As Anichka went eastward, first by car and then by train, she was surprised to see so many people everywhere, all doing something, working or waiting. The children especially attracted her attention: she looked at them with as much interest as though she had never seen a child in her life.

"After all I dreamed of doing for my country!" Anichka thought bitterly. But as she got nearer to Moscow and saw how many people were just doing ordinary jobs apparently of no importance for the war, she felt more at ease and seemed to discard the narrow view of the front-line soldier who always scorns anything outside the fighting area or not directly connected with the war. She suddenly began to think that, besides space and movement towards some concrete spot, there is also time, and that a great country moves in time, in the historical plane. She realized with wonderment that she and her future child had their place, modest indeed, but attainable, in that immense uncompassable historical movement. But they would never find that place as long as Anichka clung to her primitive one-dimensioned conception of her future.

The practical result of her meditation was the decision to start preparing, as soon as she arrived in Moscow, to enter a medical institute, so as to begin her studies in autumn. Thus, with the help of her father, she could become a very good surgeon or children's doctor.

Once this decision was taken, Anichka felt a new flow of energy and a resurge of the enthusiasm that had made her volunteer for the army. Her present decision was just as enthusiastic and passionate as that of two years before, but, besides, it was the decision of a mature mind.

4

Moscow at the end of 1943 was nothing like Moscow at the beginning of 1942. Then it had been deserted and austere, people were streaming out of it, some to the east, some to the west. Now they were pouring back, and perhaps in greater numbers, in one impressive, impetuous throng. Enlivened again and full of people and cars, the city lived a tense and noisy life; only in the evening was it silent for a few minutes to listen to the loudspeakers announcing the Red Army's victories and perhaps another artillery salute.

Anichka easily merged with the bustling, high-strung life, full of great expectations, of the almost peaceful capital. With the steadfastness that she had cultivated in herself she set about carrying out her decision: she got manuals, reference books and exercise books from friends and began to study.

In her school and institute days Anichka had considered study as an irksome duty, but now theorems and formulas interested her enormously. Formerly she had never had the courage to tackle a serious problem, now she even delighted in doing so. Perhaps intellectual effort was the best relaxation for her after the long physical tension of life at the front. Besides, mathematics, physics and chemistry evoked pleasant memories of her school-days, which, now that they were in the irrecoverable past, seemed to her the most beautiful time of her life. "I'm getting old," she would say, correctly interpreting the change that had come over her. Her eagerness to study and her success brought her contentment, even happiness. She came to the conclusion that study should be continued after a certain experience of life has been gained, for only then could one correctly appreciate the worth of new knowledge and the sublime quality of a man who uses his life to discover the secrets of life.

Professor Belozyorov soon arrived in Moscow. He had been summoned to discuss his transfer to a new post in Army Medical Corps Headquarters in Moscow.

He went to Aunt Nadya's and she told him that Anichka was in Moscow, studying hard to prepare to enter a medical institute. The news delighted the professor. He hurried home and was still more delighted to find his daughter and two other girls with textbooks piled around them. They must have been very much absorbed in their work, for they did not even notice the professor come in.

Anichka was dressed in a khaki army frock and when she turned towards her father he saw on her high breast two Orders and the Valour Medal. Her face was surprisingly calm and, the professor thought, very thoughtful.

Anichka was glad, but at the same time a little apprehensive, when she saw her father. She felt her child, which quickly reacted to all its mother's emotions, stir within her. "It's your grandson," Anichka said mentally to her father and she found it funny that her father had a grandchild and did not know about it.

The professor rejoiced that his daughter was unharmed and at the same time so charming and self-composed. He half-solemnly and half-jokingly thanked her for at last honouring medicine with her attention and reminded her that she was free in the choice of a calling. He hinted that he realized that he had acted hastily and was sorry for the misunderstanding there had been between them.

When the two other girls had left, embarrassed by the appearance of such a great authority in medicine, the professor decided to celebrate his daughter's return with a bottle of wine. But he had to drink it by himself, for his daughter, thinking of her child, feared wine might be harmful to it.

In the evening the professor got tickets for the Bolshoi Theatre and they both went to see *Swan Lake.* The atmosphere in the theatre, the old-fashioned frescoes on the large ceiling, the heavy crimson velvet and above all the ballet itself with its beautiful music and the irreproachable grace of the great ballerina Ulanova were refreshing to Anichka. They formed such a striking contrast to her recent past—the smoke-enveloped horizon, the artillery batteries camouflaged with faded autumn branches, the unbroken streams of men in greatcoats and the clutter of cars along the endless rain-washed roads. The audience's spontaneous and profound appreciation of the beauty of the human body and the music created by man seemed to Anichka a further justification for her forced departure from the army.

The professor could not help noticing the attention that Anichka attracted and the interest with which people looked at both her and him. He felt so proud of her that he could hardly believe that such a beautiful grown-up and shapely girl was his daughter.

The days passed by and Anichka still could not make up her mind to tell her father the most important thing. She felt no doubt that it would distress and grieve him. His suspicions would seem all the more founded as he did not know Akimov and perhaps did not really know her. Anichka felt uneasy when her father's blue eyes rested on her with such calm pride and, although she by no means regretted what she had done, she kept putting off telling him about it.

In the morning Anichka got up before her father, did the shopping and prepared breakfast, which he had with her. Conversation at table was lively, and they were cheerful when they were together. Then the professor would go to the People's Commissariat of Defence while she saw to the housework, cleaned up, got dinner ready or washed the clothes, sitting down as much as she could to avoid harming her baby. Then her two friends would come and they would study together.

The professor was delighted at the change he saw in his daughter. The army had fulfilled a long-standing wish of his, that of seeing his daughter take to manual work. He had learned to love the army during the war, and the good it had done his daughter still more enhanced his gratitude and admiration.

As 1943 drew to an end, Anichka at last received a whole batch of letters from Akimov. They were packed together in a newspaper, and the address was written in Captain Drozd's uneven hand.

Anichka read them all just as they came, without any order. Each one increased her admiration for Akimov's intelligence, his force of expression and his contained passion. Her pleasure knew no bounds when she saw that besides being a clever chap, he could also express himself well on paper. Only now did she see that she had not completely got out of the haughty habit acquired at the institute of estimating people according to their learning, and that she would have been distressed if the man of her choice, for all the heroism by which he had distinguished himself at the war, had not been well educated.

She wrote a long answer and ran to post it at once. When she came back she just could not settle down to her books: she read the letters over and over and then wished to write again. She did so, and the second letter was still longer than the first. This, too, she posted immediately.

Professor Belozyorov decided that he and his daughter would celebrate the New Year with his old friend, General Silayev, whose family had just returned from evacuation. That evening was also to be a farewell party, for General Silayev had just been appointed to a post at the front. He had long been doing all he could to get such a transfer, for he was disconcerted at the idea that he might not have a chance to see any real fighting, and would thus be deprived of the wealth of military experience that generals in the field were acquiring.

Arriving home rather late on New Year's Eve, the professor pressed his daughter to hurry up and change to go out. She decided to discard her army frock and to put on a new dress of her own design. It was a long, black, high-necked woollen dress with a broad sash and a round collar, made out of alternating stripes of shiny black and white silk and reaching to her shoulder-tips. The sleeves were long and broad with tight cuffs of the same material as the collar. It made Anichka look very elegant and older than she really was. Her hair was already long again and fell gracefully over her shoulders on her shining silk collar.

She hardly recognized herself in the graceful figure she saw in her mirror. Army interpreter Belozyorova, she thought, had been a different girl altogether.

She did not particularly want to go out, for she was still under the impression of the letters received from Akimov, happy and at ease. Outside she saw snow falling in big heavy New-Year flakes, and the whole city in its winter array seemed to be anxiously and voluptuously expectant.

Now and then she looked at the table on which the letters lay, and each time she smiled at them.

Her father came in, and the sight of his daughter in her new evening dress seemed suddenly to engross his attention. He was struck by something he could not understand about her, something new, womanly, too richly curved for a girl.

She paled as she noticed his look. Then she went up to him and just said, without any fear, but in a very serious tone: "Yes, father, I'm going to have a baby."

That, of course, was not the way to break the news. It would have been more diplomatic to say: "Father, I've got married." Then later, the next day perhaps, she could have told him the rest. But those words, and no others, burst from her lips because they were the most important and because she did not want to say any more than was necessary; she thought it beneath her dignity to go on being diplomatic with her own father.

All further explanations were cut short by the way the professor received her words. His eyes seemed to become leaden and blind. His usual good nature vanished. He looked at his daughter with anger and horror. His immediate conclusion was that he had been right from the beginning—that it was not at all to serve the common cause that she had joined the army. He at once believed the worst.

"Can she be my daughter?" he thought, suddenly forgetting his own youthful wanderings. Or perhaps he did not forget them. Perhaps, on the contrary, it was because he remembered his own improper dealings with women that he unconsciously despised his daughter, measuring Akimov, whom he did not know, with his own yardstick. Some fathers somehow think that men who fall in love with their daughters are rascals. Perhaps it is because they were rascals themselves on occasion?

Now he even suspected her desire to enter the medical institute of being a subterfuge to flatter and conciliate him. There was no vileness in the world he could not have attributed to his daughter at that moment.

Perhaps, if Anichka had tried to talk to him and to tell him the whole truth quietly, he would have been able to see her situation in the right light and to overcome his feeling of almost male jealousy. But Anichka read his thoughts. She flared with indignation and injured pride and said scornfully: "It's my own business, anyhow. You can keep your opinion to yourself."

She went into her room, and after standing motionless for a few minutes her father went into the passage, put on his hat and coat and went out. He did not go to General Silayev's, of course. On January 2 he resolutely refused the appointment in Moscow and went back to his former post at the front.

5

In order not to live at her father's expense Anichka took up work at the Library of Foreign Literature. Her work, which consisted in compiling catalogues of books, started early in the morning. But she often stayed after it was over, doggedly studying to prepare for the medical institute.

It was at the library that she wrote her letters to Pavel. They were always cheerful and bracing and full of amusing incidents which were supposed to have happened to her. But the difference between her letters and her own everyday life was so shocking that it pained her almost to tears. She wrote about the theatre as though she had been there herself, telling him all about the plot and the way the actors had played from her memories of five years before. She never failed to give wishes from father and Aunt Nadya and other relatives. She spoke of her work in the library as though none could be more interesting, more fascinating and better paid, though in reality it was nothing but a purely technical job.

Nearly every day she got letters from Akimov, and he sent her a certificate entitling her to draw a thousand rubles a month; thus she was able to live more comfortably.

She often surprised herself longing for the army with its community of interests and the feeling of protection against harm and contingencies prevailing in that great family of grown-ups, all armed and resolute. Her dream was to go where Akimov was, and she would of course have contrived to realize it had it not been for her child. Sometimes she even wondered whether it would not have been better for her without a child. But the idea was immediately rejected. "Suppose it becomes a great man like Lenin or Pushkin?" she would say to herself with naive conviction. "Or just another Pavel?"

She sent Pavel a list of boys' and girls' names to choose from. He chose Andrei for a boy and Yekaterina for a girl.

In July her time came and she walked slowly to the maternity home in Bolshaya Molchanovka. She could not help thinking what it would have been like if she had not fallen out with her father and cut him out of her thoughts in her proud reluctance to take the first step towards reconciliation. How many cars, professors, nurses and telegrams there would have been! He would have flown from the front to Moscow himself.

These thoughts did not make her unhappy. Her present situation, not that of a professor's daughter but of an ordinary woman with all women's worries and responsibility before the world for her actions and only herself to rely on, was congenial and even flattering to her vanity.

There were very few mothers-to-be in the home, only five for a very large ward: the war was still on.

The next night Anichka gave birth to a girl. At the same time another woman had a son.

Early in the morning the other woman's bed was already covered with flowers and letters, but nobody came to see Anichka. She felt this all the more keenly as she was a bit disappointed at having a girl instead of the boy she knew Akimov wished for.

Then at noon she received four bouquets at a time—roses, violets, phlox and even late lilac. They shed their blossoms on the hospital bed and table, reminding Anichka of her strolls in the country, of the shady gardens outside Moscow and above all of something hard to define but which seemed full of importance for her. At last she remembered: the code names of the units near Orsha on that autumn day during the harrowing fighting reconnaissance when she first met Akimov. The hospital ward, the wrinkled face of the old nurse and the big tree whose leafy branches peeped in through the wide-open window faded before a vision of a muddy battle front, narrow communication trenches, endless ravines, reeds writhing in a fierce wind and slanting rain on the bank of a stream.

Soon they brought letters, and the first that Anichka opened was one from Akimov. She nearly fainted when she thought that Akimov must be there, but she soon had the explanation. "My Darling," his note ran, "I am sending you these few lines by Comrade Kovalevsky, a correspondent for a Moscow paper, who is going to the capital. I am horribly envious of his being able to see you. I must hurry, the launch is waiting for him. He will tell you all about me."

There was a note from Kovalevsky too: "Dear Comrade Belozyorova, I went to your house, and your neighbours told me where you were. Heartiest congratulations. I am sending you a bouquet in Akimov's name and my own."

There were messages from Aunt Nadya, Tanya Novikova, the girls who had been studying with Anichka, and Captain Drozd. He, it turned out, had been sent to a military academy in Moscow a month earlier and had made up his mind to look for her on that very day.

Still weak from the pains of childbirth and from excitement, Anichka was unable to answer these letters, so she asked the nurse to thank all enquirers and tell them that she was in good health and feeling comfortable.

In the meantime, Aunt Nadya was downstairs in the reception room subjecting Kovalevsky to a strict and detailed interrogation on Akimov: what sort of a man he was, what he looked like, how old he was, what his rank was, whether he understood his responsibility, and so on.

Drozd stood a little way off, sullen and silent. Tanya Novikova and the other girls were examining everything around them with the interested curiosity of future mothers and stealing glances at the fathers-to-be who were sitting there with a miserable look as though they were guilty of some terrible wrong to their beloved wives.

When she came out of the maternity home, Anichka gave in to Aunt Nadya and went to live with her. It must be said in all justice to Aunt Nadya that she sided with Anichka against the professor, and although she worshipped her brother she spoke of him on this occasion in terms far from flattering.

"What a fool!" she said. "All men are fools!"

Kovalevsky often went to see Anichka. He told her about Akimov, how he had distinguished himself almost immediately on his arrival in the Northern Fleet and had been given command of a large submarine chaser, then of a whole squadron of submarine chasers. He spoke of him with the enthusiasm he always had for sailors. Without noticing it, he gave a most unreal idea of his acquaintance with Akimov. Although he hardly knew him, having met him only casually, he spoke of him as if he was his best friend in the Northern Fleet.

He had no intention of deceiving Anichka, for in Moscow he really imagined himself to be a great friend of Akimov's and was quite convinced of all he told her. He unconsciously repeated all he had heard of him as if he had seen it with his own eyes. Once he brought some newspaper cuttings in which Akimov was cited as an example to other officers.

Kovalevsky took a great liking to Anichka. He could watch her for hours in silence as she sat on the sofa, pale and neat, reading with great concentration and making notes or sewing for her baby. She sometimes gave him a friendly smile and asked: "Aren't you bored?" or suggested that he should go somewhere where it was more interesting.

He knew that he existed for her only as Akimov's friend, but that did not offend him. He had no other claim upon her; he just liked to be there, to see and admire her and to wonder how she could overcome the continual sleepiness—she rarely got enough sleep on account of her daughter—and go on studying or looking after her child.

The birth certificate named the child Yekaterina Pavlovna Akimova, which sounded comically long and serious for such a tiny little thing. So much about her seemed puzzling and comic. The most amazing thing was that her face, above all when she was asleep, always seemed to express feelings which were far beyond her capacity—anger, scorn, indifference, reverie, haughtiness, light-headedness or seriousness—feelings and states of mind which would one day be features of her character.

For her mother the tiny thing was all the world. Anichka became so attached to her that she could hardly imagine how she had ever lived without her little Katya. But that had been so long ago. Everything concerning the war, peace, and how they would live after the war was considered now only in terms of the child's future.

Now that she was a mother, Anichka considered herself more important, complicated and precious. She was amazed at her body having accomplished such a wonder as to give birth to a child. She took care of herself, was afraid even to cross the street too quickly for fear of endangering her life, which was now so indispensable. Recalling how light-heartedly she had risked death at the front, she trembled at the thought that there might never have been any Katya at all.

Kovalevsky looked adoringly at Anichka and her child and thought that not without reason did the figure of the mother with her child occupy such a place in all religions. He was moved almost to tears at the thought of the child's father fighting for its future, away in the north of Russia.

It was then summer in the north—the sun never set. Endless day had replaced endless night. Green grass sprouted between the granite of the cliffs. Clouds of fantastic shades, from milky white to dark purple, blew in from the sea over the land, sometimes coming down and covering the stony hills with a grey haze, making the whole surroundings look like a dank, misty lowland. Then the wind would blow them away as lightly as smoke, and the tops of the cliffs and the masts of the ships moored in the bay would again be seen.

The large red sun was sinking towards the sea as though about to disappear. It seemed yearning to cool its fiery head in the water. But some strange and invisible power held it back, and it remained as though nailed to the firmament, shedding streams of blood and purple.

"It's fine up there now," Kovalevsky said to Anichka. "I tell you, it's not a bad place to live and fight in at this time of the year. I'm in a hurry to go there myself. The offensive will be starting soon."

Indeed, he was continually asking to go to the north, but he did not receive the order till September. He immediately hurried off to see Anichka. She made up a parcel for Akimov, wrote him a letter and put in a photograph of the baby.

Still under the spell of his visits to Anichka, head over heels in love with her in secret, and full of innocent envy of Akimov, Kovalevsky left Moscow. He remained a few days in Murmansk and when he arrived at Fleet Base his first thought was to look for Akimov. He knew there were apples in the parcel, and he was afraid they would go bad.

But Akimov was no longer at his old place. He had not long ago been transferred to the Marine Corps on Rybachy Peninsula. Seeing in everything confirmation of his idea of an impending offensive, Kovalevsky thought that the steps taken by the Fleet Command to reinforce the Marine Corps with experienced staffs was a further sign of great events in the near future.

There were many indications that the decisive hour was not far off. The Fleet Commander repeatedly flew to Karelian Army Headquarters. Army generals were frequently to be seen at naval headquarters. Army units were brought up to strength in men and equipment. Ships were hastily overhauled. Submarines and naval aircraft extended the range of their operations, dislocating and destroying the sea communications of Hitler's 20th Lapland Army.

All this kept Kovalevsky so busy that it was not until the beginning of October that he reached Rybachy Peninsula.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ASHORE

1

PREPARATIONS for the storming of the German defences on the mountain range of Musta Tunturi were in full swing. The plan of the entire operation had been worked out to the finest detail, and every unit knew exactly along what strip it had to attack. The marines and the infantry on Rybachy and Sredny peninsulas were eagerly looking forward to the great occasion. Meanwhile, one of the marine battalions on the left flank was ordered to prepare to hand over its sector.

For months, even years, the men had been living in swamps, clefts in cliffs, folds in limestone or crevices in slate with shells and bombs raining on them every day. They were genuinely envious when they heard of the offensive operations on other fronts. And now that the time had come for an attack in that rugged sector, too, they were suddenly to be called away.

The general in command on the peninsulas said to the battalion commander, "Mind you, Akimov, not a word to your men until they are actually relieved. It'll be better that way."

The battalion commander smiled, to the obvious distaste of the general, who said sternly, "Is that clear?"

"Quite," the other replied. But the smile still lingered on his features. Then he asked, "Don't you know where they're sending us, Comrade General?"

The general did not answer, as though he had not heard the question. Akimov left the general's dug-out and went to his battalion, right in the forward area.

He went along whistling light-heartedly as when he was a boy going bird-catching in the woods with his pals. They used to take tins full of live beetles and worms and snares that they had made themselves. They would hide in the willow bushes and listen to the nightingales, delighting in all their modulations, for each of which they had a name: trill, shake, turn, roll, cascade.

He often felt young like that since he had got the first letter from Anichka. Never before had he imagined that a few pages in a round feminine hand could make such a difference to his mood and even his physical condition. But it was a fact that he felt younger and healthier and, what amazed him still more, his attitude to others was constantly unruffled and good-natured.

He had read his first letter on deck after returning from a routine trip. He thought himself unobserved and his face went red and pale in turns as each word sent pangs of happiness through him. When he had finished it he read it over again and then put it in his pocket. For fully three minutes he stood motionless till he was called to reality by a friendly voice saying in such a tone that it was hard to say whether it was questioning or affirmative: "So everything's all right at home, Comrade Commander?"

Akimov looked round. It was Matyukhin, a sailor from Kronstadt. His face was round and covered with big rust-like freckles and its cheerful expression appealed to Akimov. His words suddenly showed Akimov that the sailors were much keener observers than he had thought.

The next day Akimov got another letter and after that they came regularly. At first he was too happy to think of anything else, but later he could not help showering himself with reproaches. "What a petty, vile chap you must be," he thought, "to get such ideas about Anichka." Perhaps it would be more honest, he argued, to write and tell her that she had fallen in love with a rotter full of the worst defects and unworthy of her love.

He could no longer understand the blind, violent force that had so mastered him as to make him almost ready to repudiate her. Yet he suddenly felt quite clearly that in spite of his rankling suspicions he had always been convinced deep down in his soul that she was faithful and blameless. But could he have had that conviction at the same time as such terrible doubts?

He got to like Matyukhin, and when he was transferred to the marines on Rybachy Peninsula he took him with him as his runner.

Once he started getting letters from Anichka, he became more tolerant and considerate towards the men. He began to take greater interest in the sailors' private life. Formerly the men had said he was strict but fair, now they just called him a fine chap.

He was well aware of all this and even asked himself which kind of discipline was better: when the commander was strict or when he was exacting but kind. The conclusion he came to was that the men on his ship had obeyed his every word in the first place because they were dutiful, and in the second because they feared him; here, on the other hand, it was because they were dutiful and feared to hurt their commander.

The latter kind of discipline was better.

The battalion command post was in a cave in a limestone cliff. A broad smile spread over Matyukhin's face when he saw his officer arrive. He rose, but the low roof of the cave prevented him from standing to attention.

"Sit down," Akimov said, in a half-friendly, half-mocking tone. "No need to bump your head in your eagerness." Then he entered the cave.

Matyukhin glanced enquiringly at the officer but could not make up his mind to ask him what the general had called him about. He had already come to understand Akimov's character and knew that the best answer he could expect was a meaningless joke like: "Army orderlies are not such gossips."

One of Matyukhin's delights was to hear Akimov telling about battles on the mainland and the soldiers fighting there. During lulls the officer would generally lie down and relate memories of the battle for Elnya or Smolensk or the hard times in the Caucasus in 1942.

"Where do you like it most though, in the army or at sea?" Matyukhin would ask.

"Well, it's hard to say," Akimov would answer smiling thoughtfully as if suddenly remembering something. "It's more interesting to fight on land. At least you've got the earth under you, you dig yourself a foxhole and sit in it. And then there's a wood here, a grove there, or a field of rye near by—you just stay put and wait for orders. But what can a chap like you, a sailor who grew up on the Baltic, know? The sea, the port, and that's all. But after all, what is the sea? When you come to think of it, it's only a lot of water, and salty at that. But on land there's variety, colour. Mountains, hills, meadows. And then the coppices, the approaches to the big forests! Just lovely to look at!" He would always end up by laughing and saying: "It's fine everywhere except where we happen to be. Still, it's grand to remember it all."

Matyukhin took in the whole cave in one glance: all that would soon be a thing of the past too, and grand to remember. "But what did they tell him at headquarters?" he wondered as he looked sideways at the battalion commander. "Are we going to strike soon?"

He got the answer a little later when three army officers came from the unit that was to replace Akimov's battalion; it was an engineer assault brigade.

The sappers looked round with inquisitive astonishment. The cave reached deep into the cliff. When you spoke, your voice sounded strangely hollow and echoed queerly distorted against the projections and walls. There were natural shelves which seemed specially hewn out of the limestone, and on them was an orderly array of all sorts of army odds and ends: mess-tins, gas-masks, hand-grenades and the like. By one wall there was a nickelled bed in very good condition. It was the battalion commander's. On the wall hung a barometer and an elaborately ornamented German sextant. The rubber mats on the floor obviously came from a ship, and so did the small table and the chairs.

Farther back in the cave were mattresses for the men of battalion headquarters to sleep on, and a home-made lamp flickered on figures moving in the darkness. Voices could be heard. Although there was no wall between the cabin—the men's quarters, and the mess-room—the officers', there was an imaginary partition and sailors coming out of the dark depths never failed to ask permission to enter before crossing the conventional limit.

"So you like our cave, do you?" Akimov asked noticing the surprise of the engineers. "We've done our best to make it comfortable. My runner—orderly, you army fellows would call him—is an expert in the furnishing line."

Matyukhin poured out tea from a huge tin tea-pot into hardly smaller mugs. He shot cautious, almost hostile, glances at the engineer officers. "Come and find everything ready for them," he muttered amid the clatter of the mugs.

The youngest of the newcomers, a thin captain, shook his head wonderingly.

"First time you've been here on Rybachy, is it?" Akimov asked him.

"He's never been in the north before," a lieutenant-colonel answered for the captain. "Just up from Moscow. And, worse luck for him, he's got to come to a pitch black place like this."

"Yes," the captain said, "it's all so queer. Seems quite natural in books, but in reality it's somehow not right."

"It's more often just the opposite," Akimov said with a short laugh. Then he scrutinized the captain and added, "Don't fret though, you'll like it when you get used to it. Perhaps you've not been getting any letters from home?"

"No." The other reddened slightly with surprise.

Although Akimov seemed quite unconstrained during his conversation with the engineers, he was really full of anxiety. He could not at first realize what it was that alarmed him, but later it occurred to him that it was the memory of the hand-over at Orsha a year earlier.

"All the furniture we have here," he said leisurely, "is from a German mine-sweeper. Our torpedo boats shot it up and the coastal artillery finished it off. They sank it quite near us, so we organized a salvaging expedition. My lads fished up from the bottom of the Barents Sea first a suitcase, then a chair, then a bed. That sextant too. Of course, there was a lot of useless stuff. Our friend

Matyukhin naturally put up the best show. He even hauled up a barrel of wood spirits. Wanted to give me a treat, I suppose. But I made him pour the stuff into the sea. Bet it killed all the fish."

Matyukhin reddened to the roots of his hair. Everybody else laughed. All the time he was talking Akimov kept looking furtively at the lieutenant-colonel, expecting him to say any minute: "That's all very fine, but we're not clear what units the enemy has here and what their strength is; we'd like you to make a fighting reccy."

However, the lieutenant-colonel only laughed youthfully and at length rose, saying: "Well, thank you, Commander Akimov. We'll get along now. We'll take over at six a.m. as the order says."

"There's no making the time out at all here," the captain muttered.

Akimov heaved a sigh of relief when they were gone. The only ones in the cave now were his officers—his political assistant, Lieutenant-Commander Martynov, and the company commanders, Lieutenants Kozlovsky, Ventsov, and Minevich.

"Where d'you think they're sending us?" Martynov asked. The others sat there gloomily, shaking their heads with disappointment. They just could not understand the sudden order to hand over the sector, and it hardly seemed fair to them all.

"I don't know, really. Not the slightest idea," Akimov replied. "D'you think I didn't ask the general? He wouldn't tell me. Perhaps he doesn't know himself. All we have to do is to take down the route and say farewell to Rybachy. Check on everything down to the last strap. See that all weapons are clean and the men shaved."

He smiled to himself as he saw the glum faces of his officers. It was reassuring to think he was leaving not alone but with them and with the men whom he had come to like during the short time they had been together. That was much pleasanter than when he had left Major Golovin's regiment, Badeikin's sub-chaser or the detachment of chasers he had been commanding till lately.

Perhaps it was just an impression of his, but the marines pleased him more than soldiers and more than ordinary sailors. The fact was that they were soldiers and sailors all in one. They had a peculiar spirit of cohesion and dashing courage, a pride in their partiality for the sea; they were outwardly and inwardly so clean and polished, just like sailors, and at the same time they had the cold-blooded calculated bravery of the soldier and his proud conviction that the advance on land was the decisive factor in war.

On his arrival a month and a half before, Akimov had been forced to admit that he had never seen anything to match the difficult conditions here. And yet there was something almost swaggering about the marines. They were battle-seasoned and weather-beaten, the salt water had bitten through their very skin; they were lashed together by unflagging naval friendship, and when they went along over the rocks or the patchy tundra it was with the same rolling gait as on the deck of a ship.

Martynov, who came from a family of Leningrad sailors, was very tall and thin, with shoulders which were broad and straight, even a little raised, and he always had a pipe in his mouth. He was reserved and calm and always neat and clean-shaven. His toilet requisites were the admiration of everybody: he had so many brushes of different kinds and sizes, sponges and soap holders all of shining nickel or ivory. His tidiness, which was all but proverbial, had none of the affected neglect that Akimov had noticed in the way Remizov dressed. All the same, he found something in Martynov that reminded him of Remizov—unconditional and absolute devotion to the common cause and ability to suffer in silence.

Kozlovsky was short of stature but well-knit, with a swarthy young face, lively eyes and a small shapely head on a long youthful neck. Ventsov, on the other hand, was thick-set, broad-shouldered and muscular. His eyes were browless and he had thick lips of a good-natured man. Minevich had a fine nervous face which was always twitching, with a black moustache and foppish short side whiskers.

They were dressed in army uniform like all the marines, but something elusive about them told you they belonged to the navy. Their dream was to go back to a ship, but until that dream came true the peninsula, the cave, the whole world was their ship. On his army cap Minevich even wore a naval badge with a golden anchor.

After drinking their tea the officers went back to their companies. Akimov and Martynov also wanted to go there, but they were delayed by the arrival of Lieutenant-Commander Seleznyov from the next sector. He had heard of Akimov's impending departure and his extremely gloomy expression showed how much he was upset by it. Nevertheless, he started to pick out of Akimov's "equipment" all that he could find any use for, determined to leave nothing of any value to the engineers.

"All right," Akimov said, "just have a look round and see what you want. I'm going to my companies."

The forward area was along the edge of the cliffs, one strong point communicating with the next by a track at a dizzy height along which telephone wires and a thick rope were laid. There were numbers of these stout ropes all along the front, for in the dark arctic night it was impossible to find one's way without them.

Now it was midday, the short time which was the only reminder that daylight existed somewhere. As he stood by the precipice Akimov heard dissatisfied voices down below among the boulders. "They already know," he said.

When the sailors heard footsteps and recognized the battalion commander and his political assistant they fell silent.

"Tulyakov!" Akimov called out.

"Yes, Comrade Commander!" answered Chief Petty Officer Tulyakov turning to the officers his serious face with dark bushy eyebrows.

"Got the blues?"

"A bit, Comrade Commander. Pity to leave, just before the attack, you know. Had my birthday three times here in these rocky mountains. Can say I've grown old here."

"I've been here getting on for three years too," put in First Class Petty Officer Yegorov. His eyes flashed and he said with unexpected vehemence, pointing in the direction of the enemy: "Curse you! For three years I've been dreaming of catching up with you to make you pay for it all. . . ." His big knotty hand was clenched tightly. Then it unclenched and fell to his side. He looked at Akimov and said with a sheepish smile, "I've learnt all their habits here—I even know what some of them are like."

Second Class Petty Officer Gunyavin asked from somewhere out of the dark: "Do you know where they're sending us to? To the reserve or something?"

There was so much genuine anxiety in the question that Akimov could not restrain a smile. "There's nothing to worry about, lads," he said. "It won't be a picnic they're sending us on."

They all laughed.

"That's the stuff," said Yegorov.

There was pride in the eyes of the sailors as they looked up at the stalwart frame of their officer. They had all taken a liking to him and often boasted to men of other battalions: "Our officer fought in the army near Moscow and Smolensk. You're safe enough with him."

Akimov went on. He stopped at a turn in the path and looked over the German forward area. Across the isthmus towered the mountain range of Musta Tunturi. From where he stood the solid masses of cliffs seemed impregnable. The naked eye could make out the enemy's fortifications, which consisted of several rows of stone and concrete gun emplacements.

As he looked at those powerful defences, Akimov remembered how a year earlier near Orsha he had surveyed through the embrasure the Byelorussian land invaded by the Germans and had dreamed of going on and on until he had delivered Europe from the yoke of the invaders. What a far-off dream it had seemed then! But now our troops were on the approaches to Warsaw in the west and fighting for Rumania, Yugoslavia and Hungary in the south. Had Norway's turn come in the north?

"Where do you think they'll send us?" Akimov unexpectedly asked Martynov. He did not even wait for an answer but gazed at the other and said, "I think we're going to make a landing."

"What makes you think so?" Martynov asked with a sudden start.

"Where else can they send us? If I'm not mistaken we'll be in the rear of those Tirol and Steiermark *Jägers* in a day or two."

"Really!" said Martynov in a worried tone. He reflected for a minute and then said: "You'd better not tell the men about your suppositions."

"The men?" Akimov repeated with a wave of the hand. "They'll find out for themselves if they've not already done so. You can't hide much from them."

There was a muffled noise along the front: weapons clanked and the company petty officers shouted impatiently. The men were in a hurry to get all their preparations over during the light spell, which was already drawing to an end. It got dark very quickly and by the time Akimov was back in his cave everything was blanketed in thick darkness.

Seleznyov was about to leave. "Take the sextant," Akimov said to him.

"What for?"

"It's a good one. Pity to throw it away. It'll be a souvenir for you."

"All right. Thanks. I'll send some of my chaps for all the stuff."

"See you're not too long about it, or the sappers will take it."

"What about the bed, Comrade Commander?" Matyukhin asked indignantly. "We're not going to leave it, are we?"

"You can take what you like, but remember you'll have to carry it all yourself."

Matyukhin saw there was sense in the warning, and he cast a regretful farewell glance at the nickelled bed and all the other things he had gathered together with so much difficulty.

That was already part of the past, hardly more than a memory. An unknown future lay ahead.

2

When Kovalevsky turned up the next day the engineers had already taken over Akimov's cave. The correspondent was fairly tired, having clambered over the rocks all the way from the car with the parcel containing the apples.

He was quite put out when he heard that Akimov and his battalion had left for an unknown destination. Just as he was about to leave he got interested in the engineers, and after a chat with them he sat down on the bed salvaged from the mine-sweeper to write about them. "These sappers are wonderfully plucky chaps, even if they aren't sailors," he thought with emotion as he quickly filled pages of his notebook. Then he set off for the neighbouring marine unit. He was caught in heavy shelling and had to lie flat on the ground for half an hour, clutching Anichka's parcel. Luckily, he escaped unscathed. He then met the chief petty officer, Hero of the Soviet Union whose name was known in the whole fleet and whom he had long wanted to write about.

After a three hours' conversation with him and a meal of rusks and thin soup in one of the regiments, he was again about to leave. But then he heard that a coastal battery not far away had recently sunk a German self-propelled barge. That would provide interesting copy, he thought, and off he went to see it. On the way he and the soldier who was accompanying him came under withering machine-gun fire from which he thought he would never come out alive.

Much to his own dismay, Kovalevsky considered himself a downright coward. A thousand times a day his heart sank into his boots, but he always stubbornly crawled on to wherever he had heard there was an important meeting, the chance of an interesting interview or anything that could provide a good story. Still pale and trembling he would squat down somewhere with the soldiers, take notes and ask questions, envying them their calm and not noticing the admiration in the eyes of the soldiers. "He's a plucky feller, that correspondent," they would say. "Fancy coming right out to the front line to us!" Kovalevsky thought they could read in his very soul. Perhaps they could, but, far from blaming him, they were full of respect and admiration. "He's got the wind up, but he comes forward all the same," they thought.

When he had finished his business Kovalevsky again shouldered his box with the apples and made his way to where the car was waiting for him. When he was under the cover of the cliffs at a respectable distance from the front line, his fear disappeared and he cheered up a little. Some officers whom he met coming back from a special conference of the fleet commander told him that an attack was to be launched the next day to break through the enemy lines in the Musta Tunturi mountains. He immediately went back and left the apples in the stores at one of the marine units. Then, choking with excitement, he prepared to observe and take notes.

The forward area was plunged in darkness and silence. Suddenly everybody jumped up. Not far away to the north-west the rumble of artillery was heard, alternating with the rattle of machine-guns.

"Where's that?" Kovalevsky asked, unable to control his excitement.

Commander Seleznyov snatched up his map case and looked at the map. "Here, Mattivuono Fjord," he said. "Our troops must have landed there. I bet Akimov's in it!"

Kovalevsky's heart contracted. He knew well enough what an assault landing behind the enemy's lines meant, and he could not help thinking of Anichka and her child.

When the Germans on Musta Tunturi heard fighting behind them, they started a fierce random shelling of the Soviet positions on Sredny Peninsula. But our artillery there remained silent, for all the world as though everybody was asleep. Not until a few hours later, when headquarters was certain that the landing had been a success, did the artillery concentrated on Rybachy and Sredny peninsulas open fire.

The barrage lasted one and a half hours, and then the rifle regiments and the marine units went into the attack. The mountain troops under General Rendulitz did not offer any serious resistance, and soon Musta Tunturi was covered with Soviet soldiers clinging to ledges in the cliffs and creeping upwards. The flashes of grenades lit up the surroundings, while the whole area echoed with a deafening cheer of triumph.

Staff officers who arrived soon after from corps HQ told Kovalevsky that the landing troops had cut the road to Porovaara, thus creating confusion among the Germans and guaranteeing the success of the operation.

That was on October 10.

Our troops poured westward through the gap. Kovalevsky, in a car allotted to him by Naval Command, wove his way with difficulty among the stream of lorries, tracked vehicles and guns in the wake of the advancing units.

The stirring events did not make him forget Anichka's message: he asked everybody he came across where Akimov was. He found out that Akimov's battalion had indeed been in the landing at Mattivuono Fjord, but nobody could say exactly where it was then. There were rumours that the navy had landed more troops near the naval base at Linahamari during the night of October 13. These had captured the port, thus preventing the German Command from evacuating its troops by sea. There was a possibility that Akimov was there.

The progress of the advancing units was slow, for they had to cross a barren plateau strewn with heaps of boulders and dotted with swamps and marshes. The vanguard infantry units were followed by engineers who cleared roads for vehicles and guns over the desolate marshy tundra.

Vehicles often got stuck in the bogs; then they were quickly unloaded, the shells being carried by the men to the guns which had already gone ahead, while the vehicles were hauled by hand out of the mud. It rained or snowed ceaselessly, it was cold and damp. When Kovalevsky got stuck, as he did several times, he would burst into the ranks of some passing unit, asking for help. The soldiers were at first in no hurry to do so, for they could not understand why a senior lieutenant was travelling in a passenger car. But as soon as he said that he was a press correspondent they worked with a will to get him on the road again. They were flattered that somebody outside the army should witness the hard time they were having and make it known to the public "down south." They considered even Moscow to be far away to the south from where they were.

Kovalevsky found out where corps telegraph was and sent off a despatch full of exclamation marks. It started with the words: "My car is driving along with the advancing troops. Pechenga lies in front of us."

Pechenga, formerly called by the Finnish name Petsamo, was indeed quite near. The lowland, wrapped in fog, shuddered from the boom of guns. Three German prisoners were brought in by car, crestfallen and pitiable to look at. They came from the Tirol and had been trained in the Alps under Schörner and Dietl. They were a sorry sight now compared with what they had been at the beginning of the campaign referred to in documents of the German General Staff as "Blue Fox."

Kovalevsky spoke to them there and then, and quickly wrote out a despatch which he immediately wired to Moscow. "Here are the Crete and Narvik heroes," it began, "trudging over the tundra, their heads hanging."

He was in Petsamo the day after it was taken. He interviewed generals and soldiers and chatted with sailors and marines. The eyes of the world, he thought, were now turned towards the north.

Petsamo! It was from here that the German ships had operated, it was from here that the Nazi planes had raided long-suffering Murmansk. That town which had been such a thorn in our side and had seemed so inaccessible was now in our hands.

Kovalevsky fixed himself up near a brigade headquarters and started to write. The first article began, "My car is slowly driving through the streets of Pechenga, which our troops have just delivered." Truth would have had it that there were no streets in Pechenga at all, but just a single road with wooden buildings here and there at rare intervals along it.

Kovalevsky had forgotten all about Akimov's parcel. His conscience pricked him when he remembered about it and he ran to the navy liaison officer in the town to find out at last where he could get in touch with Akimov. He was told that the Linahamari area was the most likely place, and he immediately set out for it. Then it turned out that the apples were nowhere to be found, the marine unit to which Kovalevsky had left them having pulled out long ago in the direction of the Norwegian border. "What bad luck!" Kovalevsky exclaimed. Those apples were a real nightmare. He was keen to get them to Akimov, for he knew how pleased and grateful he would be. Just imagine, fresh apples up in the far north!

He could imagine Akimov's delight and his own grudging contentment when he told him about Anichka and her baby daughter, Anichka's success in the entrance examination and her great love for Akimov.

The news was after all far more important than the apples, he thought, and he therefore drove to Linahamari. But he did not find Akimov there either. A few hours earlier, assault landing units had embarked for an unknown destination.

3

The marines had sailed in assault craft for a further landing—the third in the last few days—in the German rear and flank, this time on Norwegian territory.

The operation had been planned as follows: the vanguard sailed in ten submarine chasers, followed at a distance of ten miles by a contingent of ten escort ships and ten mine-sweepers with a further contingent another ten or twelve miles behind them. The embarkation took place in great secret, the only noise being the creaking of the gangways and the rattle of arms.

Just before the troops went abroad, the fleet commander, accompanied by staff officers, went along the shore from one battalion and one company to another. Torches flashed here and there, showing the admiral the way.

When he arrived at Akimov's battalion he asked in that guttural accent of his that every man down to the last ship's cook in the Northern Fleet knew so well, "Who's embarking here?"

Akimov reported in due form and the admiral, with Akimov at his side, went among the marines and had a talk with them. He was about to go on, when suddenly he flashed his torch in Akimov's face. The battalion commander's open weather-beaten features were tense and severe. "Don't you want to go back to a ship?" the admiral asked.

The question amazed Akimov. Somewhere long, long ago, he thought, someone had asked him the same question, at night, too, under the glare of a torch. He could not remember whether it was a fact or just a fancy of his.

"It's up to the command," he answered evasively.

The admiral switched off his torch and it immediately became very dark. After a silence the admiral said, "Keep a stiff lip, Akimov. When you've finished this job I'll bring you back to the fleet. You've done enough fighting on land. Agreed?"

"Yes," Akimov answered. Suddenly he felt somehow sorry for the admiral whose voice was so weary and anxious, and he added, "Don't worry, Comrade Admiral, we'll make a good job of it."

The admiral shook hands impetuously with Akimov and went on along the coast without another word, the light of the pocket torches soon disappearing in the distance.

Akimov went to the submarine chaser that had been allotted to him. Kozlovsky's company was also to go on board the same craft, the others having sailed with the first contingent.

Embarkation was in full swing. The sailors from the chasers gave the marines orders in low voices directing them to the cabins. A good-natured voice was heard saying: "Don't forget to give them bowls and pails, or when they start being sick they'll spew the whole ship full. Nasty sea today."

"We won't spew, don't you fear," one of the marines answered in the same tone. "We've seen smarter ships than yours."

"You have, have you? Well, chuck that cigarette away or you'll be seeing something else." The marine guffawed.

Having ascended the gangway Akimov stopped a minute to see his men disappearing down the hatchway on their way to the cabin; then he went up on the bridge to introduce himself to the captain of the chaser. Friendly relations with the skipper of the landing craft meant a lot for the success of the operation.

Just as he reached the bridge, he bumped into one of the crew, and looking closer he recognized Zhigalo.

"Zhigalo! You here?" he exclaimed, hardly able to believe his own eyes.

"Commander Akimov!" Zhigalo answered. "Is it really you?" He heartily shook the hand offered him and said, "Won't our commander be glad!"

Akimov hurried to the bridge and hugged the short lieutenant, who was so moved that the words stuck in his throat. All he could say was, "Would you believe it!"

Before they had time to begin a conversation, the signal to put out to sea was given.

A wind of gale strength was blowing. The sub-chaser was tossed about like a cockle-shell. The Barents Sea, obviously wishing to let the small ships feel how merciless it could be, pounded them furiously to the accompaniment of a howling and screeching wind.

Akimov stood on the bridge by Badeikin, occasionally wiping the water off his face and looking at the short captain with a merry twinkle in his eyes. The other replied with the smile that Akimov remembered as making his flat face look so much pleasanter.

"Thinned down a lot," Badeikin shouted.

"What?" asked Akimov, who could not hear for the howl of the wind.

"Got thin."

"Didn't have your Nina to cook for me!"

"Ha-ha!"

"Congratulations!" Akimov shouted.

"What on?"

"Your promotion, Comrade Senior Lieutenant. Didn't notice before."

"Thanks," answered Badeikin with a smile.

"What?"

"Thanks!"

"This is weather for you!" Akimov said, laughing.

"Where's it better?" Badeikin bawled above the wind. "Here or in the army?"

"Everywhere," Akimov grinned. Then he leaned over and shouted in Badeikin's ear: "You can congratulate me too: got a daughter."

"What?"

"A baby, a daughter. Katya."

"Congratulations!"

A huge wave made the craft heel over to starboard. "Hold on, lads!" Akimov shouted to his men, who were crowding on deck. His powerful voice was heard above the howl of the wind, and wet faces, all smiling reassuringly, were raised towards him from the deck. Kashevarov turned away from the helm a moment to look at Akimov, whom this again reminded of his youth. Akimov patted Kashevarov's shoulder. Kashevarov smiled and said something Akimov did not catch. Looking at his men standing on the deck, Akimov could guess the well-known faces under the black caps: Tulyakov, Matyukhin, Gunyavin, Yegorov and others. With a touch of jealousy he thought that his boys were in no way inferior to Badeikin's and that you could do great things with them.

The familiar outline of the coast drew Akimov's attention. There was nothing in the dark precipitous cliffs overhanging the sea to distinguish them from those he had seen before, and yet they had elusive features of their own. Now they were at the entrance to Varanger Fjord, the place to which he had sailed on the very same sub-chaser as Badeikin's understudy. There, just a little farther on, they had landed Letyagin and his reccy party. Badeikin remembered it too. He tapped Akimov on the shoulder and pointed shoreward. "Aye," said Akimov.

He recalled how he had pitied the reccy men for the hard and dangerous time in store for them on that cold, rugged coast. Now he had to land there himself, and yet he saw nothing terrible in it. The thought of landing on a foreign shore where the people, allies of his own, were suffering the ordeals of occupation made him swell with pride at the might and greatness of the nation and the armed forces of which he was a member. He was overwhelmed by the thought that from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea the Soviet Army had already freed its own country, and that its job was now no longer just to defend its own people but to free others. A job worth doing, and one they could and would cope with.

When he was in the Y.C.L. he had been elated by all sorts of airy, rather abstract, but splendid passionate dreams of delivering the whole world from tyranny and oppression. Now those dreams were a reality. They had taken a definite shape. Not quite what his youth had dreamt of, of course, but wonderful all the same. Yes, here was reality: the Soviet flag fluttering from the mast, the throb of the sub-chaser's engine, the lights blinking code signals, the silent tenseness of the landing party on deck, the excited thumping of his own still young heart and the dark contours of a foreign coast where a people was longing for liberation.

Nearer and nearer that coast came. Clearer and clearer became the outline of the cliffs which seemed to tower higher and higher. The sub-chasers were at last gliding between two rocky crests at the deep narrow entrance of the fjord.

Although the boats were sailing without lights or wireless signals and the engines had been switched to underwater exhaust, they were soon spotted from the coast. A bright flash was seen, the report of a gun was heard, and a shell burst in the sea not far away. There was firing from both sides of the fjord. Shells flew overhead with a faint whistle. Dozens of flares shot up over the fjord and slowly sank into the water.

Badeikin ordered a smoke-screen to be laid and the other boats did the same. Then they all made for the coast, thus widening the pall of smoke. The fjord was soon covered with billowing clouds of smoke which hid everything from view. The German coastal batteries fired ceaselessly and at random, and sometimes the dull crimson glare of an explosion flashed in the smoke, and green columns of water, amazing in their beauty, rose above the fjord.

Badeikin knew the coast well—he had no difficulty in bringing his ship to the appointed spot on the coast. But he was worried for Akimov, sorry for his comrade who had to force a landing and then march on in that inhospitable land with never a place where he could get dry and warm. "It's different with us sailors," he thought, wiping away the salt water which was freezing on his cheeks. "He shouldn't have gone to fight ashore."

The signal for the landing was given.

The sub-chasers were already close to the coast. The ship's cannon and machine-guns were firing away to clear the shore of the enemy. German flares soared feverishly and hovered trembling in the sky. In their light the stormy sea, the foamy breakers and the passionate faces of the sailors stood out in bold relief against the cold deep shadows as on an amateur snapshot.

A shell burst near by and the splinters whistled on all sides. Heavy machine-guns rumbled down the gangway. A second shell burst. One man groaned, another fell into the water. The dark figures of the landing troops swept down the gangway and scattered over the shore. A third shell exploded quite near.

"Collision mats!" Badeikin ordered in a hoarse voice.

"The chaser's been hit," Akimov thought. But he had no time to think of that now. His mind was already on the land with his men who were going into battle. He did not even say good-bye to Badeikin, either he forgot to or he was prevented from doing so. But as he stepped on the gangway a feeling of guilt stabbed his heart at being forced to abandon his friend in need..

As he reached the shore he was blown sideways by an explosion, and falling into the water, he grabbed at jutting rock. His ears were buzzing. Suddenly, scorching air seemed to envelop him, and turning round he saw the sub-chaser in flames. He needed all his will not to rush back, but he pulled himself together, swallowed bitterly and climbed ashore. The last he saw of the sub-chaser was Zhigalo, the bos'n, still at his machine-gun, firing in long bursts at the German strong points on the shore, while behind him flames were hissing and explosions rending the air.

4

"Forward! Forward!" Akimov kept urging in a low voice as he crept on. Beside him was Matyukhin, and a little behind came navy spotters with a portable wireless to direct the fire from the ships on to the targets ashore.

A cold, bitter fury seemed to be bursting Akimov's chest. He tried hard not to look back, but even the unfamiliar smell of foreign soil as he went along crouched over the ground could not efface the smell of burning paint that the wind blew in from the fjord. Nor could the rumble of the guns and the roar of the breakers, the grunts of the sailors crawling along around him and the clatter of the machine-guns on the flanks prevent him from hearing the creaking and splashing, the minor explosions and the cries of warning coming from the subchaser sinking behind him.

"Forward! Forward!" he repeated in his low voice, creeping towards a peak from which he had decided to direct the battle. He reached it at last and found Lieutenant Kozlovsky already there. He surveyed the steeply rising battle-field before him, where landing troops were creeping forward.

The foremost among them were already at a cable's length from the water but counter fire made them lie flat. A small foothold the shape of a half-circle had been captured. The most stubborn fighting was going on to the left, where Tulyakov was keeping up steady machine-gun fire. The well-fortified German coast battery at the foot of the cliff had obviously a strong infantry covering, for the firing from there became fiercer and fiercer.

Akimov ordered the navy spotters to report the hold-up to the naval gunners and then crawled along the front where the marines were lying on the ground.

"Ready!" he said, in a low voice, and when the marines heard the familiar naval word of command from the lips of their commander they nodded to show that they had understood. Bombs from concealed enemy mortars fell with ear-splitting blasts, first on a strip along the water's edge, then gradually nearer to the marines. Akimov, straining his ear, at last heard the ships' guns go into action and then saw something blow up and burst into flames on the left flank.

For a moment the flickering blaze lit up everything all around—the monotonous cliffs, with their growth of lichens and moss, the stunted willows and the dark sheds on the top of the cliffs.

"Here goes," said Akimov, rising to his full height and taking his pistol out of its holster.

Matyukhin raised the flare pistol and fired three red flares in succession.

The men stood up after Akimov and all at once tore open the front of their tunics as though they felt hot. Matyukhin leisurely took out of his pocket his sailor's hat, put it on, and just as leisurely put his army cap away inside his greatcoat.

How often and severely had Martynov, who was so fond of neatness and order, rebuked the sailors for that habit of breaking regulations! They would listen to him with remorse in their eyes but would do exactly the same thing in the very next engagement.

That threatening gesture of the sailors meant more than a desire to show their striped sailor's singlets—the emblem of the sailor to whom fear is unknown. It meant also willingness to sacrifice their lives and scorn for death.

"Forward!" roared Akimov, intoxicated with the tenseness of the moment.

They all dashed forward up the steep slope, not shouting as the infantry do, but silent, with an irresistible swinging step. When they reached the crest they rushed forward over it and across the plateau. Here everything was dark; there were no more flares, probably because the Germans who had been shooting them had fled. The sea was no longer to be seen, for the cliffs hid it from view; everything that was on the sea, their beloved ships, their brother sailors, the flag of their motherland and the possibility of returning by sea, seemed unreal and far away.

Akimov had paused on the crest in order not to lose sight of the flanks and the fjord. The navy spotters set up their wireless again. Matyukhin shot flares to show the extent of the advance. Everybody was breathing heavily. Wounded men crawled past on their way to the sea. Runners came in from all directions to report and then disappeared again into the darkness. A lull set in, but it seemed a treacherous one, tense and alarming. And then everything was lit up once more by flares.

"Beginning again," Akimov remarked.

The German fire was heavier than ever.

A man came running over from the left, sometimes crouching low, his eyes shining in the light of flares with a gleam that might have been fear just as it might have been defiance. While he was still a good way off he shouted out in a voice that sounded cheerful: "They're getting tough, the German sons of. . . ." Recognizing the battalion commander, he stood to attention as if on the parade ground and reported: "The enemy's counter-attacking, Comrade Commander. Tulyakov asks for help."

Akimov looked at the sailor for about half a minute without recognizing him, for his whole face was smeared with dirt and blood.

"How many men left?" he then asked, looking forward at the swaying shadows of trees. But the sailor, thinking the question was meant for somebody in front, did not answer. "It's you I'm talking to," Akimov said.

The sailor looked round and then came close to Akimov and said almost in his ear, "Only a few."

"You take ten men and go there," Akimov said to Kozlovsky.

The lieutenant started off down the slope at the head of his men. The muzzle attachments of the light machine-guns glimmered in the light. The sailor with the blood-stained face ran ahead of the lieutenant, leaping in a strange way and muttering. Only then did Akimov realize that it was Yegorov.

There was another lull. German shells were exploding right by the water. "What's the matter?" Akimov thought. At that very moment he heard the stamp of many feet behind him. Then somebody called him from below and in a few minutes Lieutenant-Commander Martynov, out of breath with running, almost fell at his side. "Here we are," he said.

The whole area suddenly seemed to be full of men. There was noise and shouting. Akimov cast a parting glance at the sea and at the ships lying off shore, mentally saying farewell to his friends, living and dead, and marched forward at the head of his battalion. The roar of the breakers faded in the distance and even the flares seemed only a pale glare. The battalions stretched along the rocky road, going deeper into the narrow defiles of that unknown coastland.

During a short halt Akimov called the commanders together. "What's the matter with Yegorov?" he asked. "Wounded?" "Yes," came the answer, "but he refused to drop out."

"And Buikov?"

"Wounded but refused to drop out."

"Semyonov?"

"Killed."

"Levashov?"

"Killed."

"Sotnikov?"

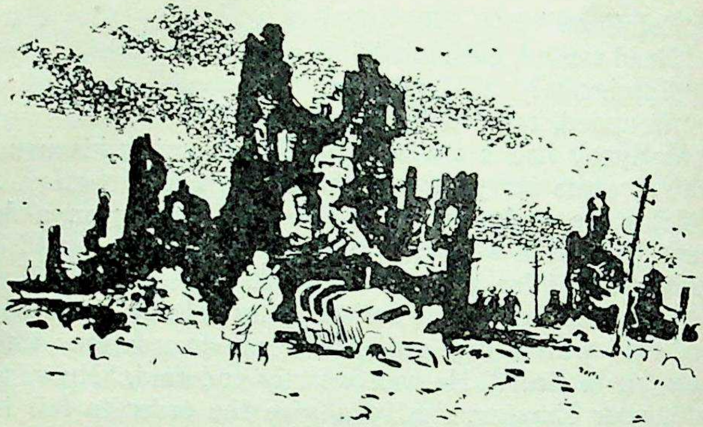
"Head wound, evacuated."

"Boychenko?"

"Wounded, refused to stay behind."

Martynov had a wash, carefully scrubbing his hands with a white ivory-backed nailbrush. His razor lay on a flat stone and shaving water was heating on a fire near by. "Those who distinguished themselves should be recommended for awards," he said.

Akimov looked at the sailors lying side by side below and said with a wry smile, "It's not awards they want now, but a sleep." He rose wearily and said, "Hurry up with your shaving. And you give the order to fall in. We'll march to Kirkenes."



CHAPTER EIGHT

ASHORE

(CONCLUDED)

1

THE TOWN of Kirkenes no longer existed. It had been systematically blown up and burned down, house by house, by the Germans before they fled.

Big heaps of coal which lay along the coast had also been set on fire by the Germans and were glowing with a blue glimmer as far as the eye could see. Everywhere the nose was assailed by the pungent-sweet smell of fire and destruction, that heart-rending smell that Akimov had known in the Smolensk area and in Byelorussia and which one can never forget.

The silence of death reigned all around, disturbed only by a few shells which the Germans, still holding the rocky island of Skögeroy opposite the town, fired on it every half-hour in their stupid, senseless way. The shells burst with a hollow echo in the burnt-out streets.

Akimov and his men patrolled the deserted town in silence. They guessed the lay-out of the streets by the chimney stacks protruding here and there out of the rubble and the neat wire-netting garden fences. Where wonderfully clean neat streets must have been there was now a maze of ravelled German telephone wires of all colours. The map showed a church where the land jutted out into sea: hence the name of the town, meaning Church Ness. But the church too was destroyed and only part of the churchyard railings remained.

They went left to the Sud Varanger Works. One of the high chimneys was still standing but all that remained of the other was a huge heap of bricks. Here too the silence was oppressive and there was not a soul around.

"The same Germans have been here as were by Orsha," Akimov said. "No doubt about it, it's their hand you can see here."

"Yes, the same as at Leningrad," Martynov added grimly as his ear caught the roar of another batch of German shells.

Akimov spoke to headquarters by wireless and was instructed to go to the village of Björnevatn and wait for further orders. He left Minevich with his company and three days' food and ammunition near the coast and led the rest of the battalion along the streets and over the heaps of rubble to the road beyond.

The road led to the south. Alongside it, over the marshy snow-powdered tundra, the black rails of a narrow-gauge railway could be seen with abandoned barrows here and there, rusting and covered with frozen snow.

Björnevatn had suffered less than Kirkenes. The red Norwegian flag with its white-edged blue cross was already flying from high flagstaffs near the houses. The inhabitants came out and greeted the Soviet units with subdued rejoicing. They lived in the mines and caves on the outskirts of the village. The soldiers and marines looked sympathizingly at the exhausted and harrowed faces of the Norwegians.

Akimov accommodated his men in a long red wooden building that seemed to have been the baths, and three houses which had been occupied by the Germans till the very last minute and had therefore not been blown up. There were iron beds and woollen army blankets inside.

All the soldiers except those on duty immediately lay down to sleep, not even waiting for the battalion cooks to prepare a meal which, having lost all account of time, they did not know whether to call breakfast, dinner or supper.

After billeting all his men, Akimov was about to lie down when, despite the fact that he was half-deafened by days of shelling, he heard a baby cry not far away. He went out into the street and Matyukhin, almost dying with fatigue but unable to make up his mind to sleep when he saw his officer going out, followed him. Akimov went to the mine and somewhere inside he heard women trying to calm weeping children.

He entered the dark underground passage and when he saw the children he felt for the first time what he had so far only known, that he was a father himself. So terrifyingly pale in the light of the carbide lamps were those children's faces that Akimov's heart swelled with pity and anxiety for his own little daughter, far away in Moscow. The men standing in silence by the walls were no longer to him just human beings who had been robbed of all they had by the invaders; they had something he shared with them—they were fathers, fearing for their children.

Nearly all the men were tall and fair-haired and had the weather-beaten faces of fishermen and inhabitants of the sea-shore. The majority of them, and the women too, were dressed in coloured woollen pull-overs and ski-trousers.

Akimov stood still and irresolute, wondering what to do, until a man in Soviet uniform came out of the depths of the mine. Akimov recognized Letyagin and rushed towards him.

"So you're here too?" Letyagin said, his pale face lighting up with joy. Then he pointed to the people around him and said sadly: "See what's happening here? The Germans have blown everything up and taken away the fishing smacks and motor boats. The people can't even go fishing—they're starving."

Akimov thought for a while and then said, "I can feed about two hundred of them for a start—my cook-house is working now."

Letyagin's face brightened and he said a few words to the Norwegians, who immediately disappeared into the mine to call the women and children. These were up in an instant and following Matyukhin to the cook-house. Akimov noticed with pleasure that the men did not go with the women but stayed where they were.

"Let them go too," he said. Then he laughed and added, "They say Christ fed a whole division with five loaves. I'm better off than he was, I've got bigger stocks: we fought for two days and ate hardly a bite." His face clouded over as he said in an afterthought, "Besides there are not so many men in the battalion now."

Akimov and Letyagin slowly followed the Norwegians to the kitchen. Deryabin, the cook, who during the fighting was a machine-gunner, a fat kind-hearted man like a real ship's cook, had got Matyukhin to help him to commandeer all the mess-tins of the sleeping sailors and was serving up some plain but thick and satisfying millet gruel to the women and children. Seeing the battalion commander, he called out to him, "What about bread, Comrade Commander?" "Give them some," Akimov answered.

He was overjoyed at meeting Letyagin. The reccy officer was uncommunicative, but he knew all there was to know about the north of Norway, spoke the language fluently and seemed to feel quite at home there. The Norwegians treated him in a particularly friendly way and seemed to have great trust in him. Many of them knew him from the time when he had been operating behind the German lines, and they had changed his name into *lettjeger* or "fleet hunter," which expressed their own opinion of him.

"Where do you have your food?" Akimov asked him.

"Anywhere," was the smiling answer.

"Or perhaps nowhere? Come and have your meals with me."

"Thanks," said Letyagin. Then he turned round and said, "There's the commandant coming."

The commandant, a grey-haired colonel, came up with a senior lieutenant. He watched the Norwegians eating for a while and then asked Akimov, "Are you in command here?"

"Yes."

"You did well in feeding them," he said.

"Loginov, interpreter," he added, introducing the senior lieutenant.

Loginov was very young and had horn-rimmed spectacles and a lively, handsome face. He took a liking to the naval officer at once, especially when he heard of his praiseworthy initiative in feeding the population. The colonel again watched the Norwegians as if he had never seen people eating before. Then he gave the order for all army units in and around the village to feed the local population until more supplies came and definite arrangements were made.

Soon Loginov brought along the burgomaster, a tall fair man like all the other Norwegians, but very frightened-looking. He had been hiding somewhere in the ruins and knew nothing of what was going on in Kirkenes and the surrounding area. Loginov had managed to find him after much seeking and, not without a certain solemnity, had made him the civil representative of the Allied Administration.

Letyagin suggested that the burgomaster and the commandant should go to see the people living in the mines. "They're a grand lot, these Norwayers. They helped me many a time," he muttered as though wishing to justify the interest he took in them.

After a further look at the shivering children, the pale women and the dispirited fathers, Akimov said with a sigh, "We'll have to hand the houses over to them, hang it!" Then apologizing, as it were, for being so soft-hearted he added, "Our men will have to live in caves and dug-outs again, there's no help for it."

The colonel objected gruffly: "Our men need a rest. They're human beings too." A moment later he raised his hands, his harsh square face assumed a helpless expression, and he said in a heart-sick tone: "I suppose you're right after all, Major. It's awkward and doesn't seem right with children here. Yes, Loginov, write out an order to free all the houses remaining intact. That's that."

The burgomaster was immediately informed of the commandant's decision by Loginov and he overcame his reserve enough to show satisfaction mingled with surprise.

Akimov went back to his battalion. The men he had billeted in the houses and the building where the baths used to be were lying in the strangest positions, fast asleep, and breathing heavily. The duty man of the day was dozing by a hot round iron stove. Yegorov was the only one to hear the battalion commander enter. He opened his eyes, half rose and said in a reproachful tone, "You should lie down and have a sleep, Comrade Commander."

"I will soon," Akimov answered absently.

Yegorov pointed to his sailor's singlet and said with a smile, "Got undressed. Probably the first time in about two and a half years. Feels fine."

Akimov reddened and turned away. "Would you like a feather bed and a hot-water bottle?" he asked. Then he shook the duty man. "Get everybody up."

"Reveille!" the duty man bawled, and all the men jumped up and started dressing in a hurry.

Akimov explained in a few words why he had wakened them up. Then he lit a cigarette and wanted to go, but somehow he could not, and he lingered there. He looked warily at the faces of the men, who were putting their coats on and rolling up their blankets without a word. He was trying to find some sign of dissatisfaction, but to his great relief he detected not the slightest show of vexation or inclination to grouse. The men had no doubt taken the order as the most natural thing in the world.

2

The only building Akimov left his battalion was the place where the baths had been. There he had the cookhouse, the dining hall, a kind of club and the battalion office. He made the men move out of the houses and gave them to the women, children and old men.

"This is the right place for us," Akimov grinned with a mocking glance round the dug-out he had moved to with his officers. "Matyukhin, get things in order."

Deryabin brought the officers fried fish. "Quite fresh," he said with a smile, "only just caught it."

They ate it and lay down to sleep. Silence reigned, for the marines too were sleeping. All except Matyukhin who went away and brought back a small table, a few chairs, a carbide lamp, a wash-basin and a scorched piece of staircase carpet that he spread at the entrance. The dug-out soon looked like a well-appointed mess-room in the front line. The orderly smiled with satisfaction and was about to lie down at last when the interpreter arrived with an aging Norwegian.

"Shsh," Matyukhin warned them angrily, "the commander's asleep. Not had a sleep for a week."

"Can't be helped," Loginov said in a tone of apology. "I need him, honestly I do."

The Norwegian turned out to be the local minister. He had come to ask permission to conduct divine service in the baths building, that being the only one in the village that was big enough.

Akimov rubbed his forehead and looked sleepily at Loginov and the Norwegian, not understanding where he was or what was wanted of him. It dawned on him at last. "Of course," he said, "we're in Norway. So you want to hold a service?"

Hearing this, Martynov opened his eyes and jumped up. "No, we can't have that," he said indignantly. "I've had the whole place decorated with portraits and slogans! Can you imagine religious rites with portraits of the Party and Government leaders as a background?"

Akimov laughed. It was amusing, indeed, to see the withering glances Martynov shot at the Lutheran minister, who had retired in confusion to the corner of the dug-out.

"It's nothing to laugh at," Martynov said angrily. "I can't allow religious services to be performed in a Red Fleet club."

There was a short argument on the point, and Matyukhin expressed the opinion that they should "let them get on with their prayers. The Party doesn't forbid anybody to pray, but it does forbid offending the local population."

"The voice of the people is the voice of God," Akimov laughed.

Within an hour the Norwegians began to assemble in the club. They took their places in an orderly manner on the benches with their prayer books in their hands, and as there were not enough benches many of them remained standing. The minister came in his long frock-coat. His narrow, weather-beaten fisherman-like face wore a solemn, somewhat melancholy expression like that of ministers of religion all over the world when they are conducting divine service. Just like Father Vasily, the Kovrov pope, Akimov thought, remembering his childhood.

Loginov stayed to listen to it and afterwards told Akimov that no political lecturer could have made a better job of it. The minister thanked the Soviet troops and the Soviet Army Command and exhorted all his parishioners to collaborate with them and pray for the deliverance of the whole of Norway and the complete rout of the impious German armies. Then the whole congregation sang a hymn.

"Not so bad after all," Martynov commented, reassured, "but I don't know why he brought God into it."

After the service, the minister, the burgomaster and two other Norwegians, evidently influential people in the village, came to Akimov and thanked him for having allowed them to hold divine service and for his kindness to the population.

"Olsen, the schoolmaster," the interpreter said in Russian, "and this is Vikkola, a rich peasant and a thorough scoundrel. Worked hand in hand with the Germans. Wholesale dealer in cod and salmon. Owns all the shops in the locality."

His tone was grave and loud and Akimov needed all his strength of will not to laugh in Vikkola's red, haughty but deadly uneasy face, in which the only movement was that of the evasive beady eyes.

Akimov was by no means a diplomat: he refused to shake hands with the man, just acknowledging him with a slight nod of the head. Then he looked straight into Vikkola's eyes and the dealer's lids twitched nervously.

"Windy, are you, old paunch-belly?" Akimov asked. Loginov smiled slightly and hastily translated: "What can I do for you?"

The Norwegians spoke each in turn, first the burgomaster, then the minister, then the schoolmaster and finally Vikkola. He had more to say than anybody. His voice was calm, but his eyes kept shifting deceitfully.

"He says he heartily welcomes the victorious Russian troops," Loginov interpreted, "and that the people of Kirkenes are glad the war is ending and will dutifully carry out all the orders of His Majesty King Haakon, the Norwegian Government in London and the Soviet Military Command. He has the face to say he's glad to be freed from the tyranny of the invaders. Downright rascal."

It is difficult to say whether Vikkola understood what the interpreter said. Perhaps he read in Akimov's eyes what that son and grandson of weavers felt towards the kulak and exploiter. At any rate, he bowed low and respectfully as he went out, taking care not to meet the eyes of the Soviet officers.

Akimov and Loginov saw the Norwegians out of the dug-out. They noticed that the village had considerably livened up. Men and women with children, pushing bicycles or carrying rucksacks, were returning from shelters in the woods or clefts on the plateau. Akimov smiled when he saw little girls, relatively well dressed and wearing knitted caps with pompons. Clinging to their mother's or father's hand or holding on to the saddle of the bicycle, they had almost to run to keep up with the longer strides of their parents. They kept looking inquisitively at the Russians until they disappeared out of sight.

Seeing the light of blue flames far away to the north where the heaps of coal were burning, Akimov turned to Loginov and asked him, "Why don't they put the coal out? It's a pity to see it burning away when they have nothing to heat their houses with."

Loginov said a few words to the burgomaster who, after a minute's thoughtful silence said, *"Det er ikke vårt."*

"It's not ours," Loginov interpreted, and then he laughed a good-natured, shrill laugh and explained that the coal belonged to the factory, not to the town authorities. "We'll have to get our soldiers to salvage it for them," he concluded.

The Norwegians departed and Loginov was about to go too when an old man came straight to Akimov's dugout. Seeing the battalion commander, he stopped a little distance away and stared at him. He seemed to convince himself of something—what it was none but he knew—came nearer and took off his sou'wester, revealing grey hair falling straight down over his high forehead. He spoke in a deliberate, monotonous and mournful voice, his steady, shining eyes fixed on a point between Akimov and Loginov.

The interpreter's face reddened as the old fisherman spoke. "It seems our lads have stolen his motor boat," he translated. "He's a fisherman, his name is Kåre Pedersen. 'I managed to hide it from the Germans,' he says, 'but the Russians have proved too clever for me, they've found it.' It's disgraceful. A real shame, honestly it is."

Akimov flared up with anger. "Not so quick with your disgrace and shame," he said. "Don't you know there's a war on, whole towns burning? What's the idea of blushing like a girl just because a boat's got lost. You'd think something terrible had happened, that it was the end of the world, or that we'd disgraced ourselves before the whole of humanity." But the sight of the old man standing silent and motionless, hat in hand, froze the reminder on his tongue. "Tell him we'll see to it," he said in a gruff tone.

When Loginov and old Pedersen had gone, Akimov smoked a while, plunged in thought; then he went to the dug-outs where the companies were.

The men were still asleep. Why should he waken them up for an old boat that was no use to anybody? He remained there for a minute, looking askance at Yegorov who was asleep with his boots and greatcoat on, and then he turned to go. But he stopped all of a sudden and said to the man on duty, "Wake them up."

When the men had fallen in Akimov asked, "Who took the boat?"

For about a minute nobody said anything. At last Chief Petty Officer Tulyakov stepped forward and coolly asked, "What boat are you talking about, Comrade Commander? I took a boat."

Akimov could not believe his ears. "What for?" he asked.

After a short embarrassment Tulyakov answered, "To go fishing."

"Fishing? What for?"

"For you, Comrade Commander," Tulyakov replied in a low voice.

"For me?" Akimov went pale. "So you think I can't live without fish, do you, Chief Petty Officer? Eh? Sorry for me, are you? And so to please me you've gone and disgraced yourself and me in front of everybody? Where is the boat?"

"I put it back where I got it."

"Stand easy," Akimov said to the sailors. "Dismiss."

They all disappeared with relief into their dug-outs, Tulyakov remaining alone with the battalion commander.

"Show me the place," Akimov ordered.

Tulyakov went first. After a long walk they came to a narrow fjord on the right. Tulyakov followed the bank without any hesitation and, stopping a while to think, went down to the edge of the water. There lay the boat in a fissure between the rocks.

"Where did you take it from?" Akimov asked. "Here?"

"Yes, I think it was here."

Akimov looked round. About three hundred paces farther up the fjord he could make out the dark form of a fisherman's cabin. He went nearer and saw nets drying on the fence. Stepping over the fence he knocked at the door, which was immediately opened. A girl's voice said something in Norwegian.

"Pedersen?" Akimov asked.

"*Ja*," answered the girl, and Akimov understood the word from the German.

"Kåre Pedersen?" he insisted.

"*Den gamle mann er ute i sjön*,*" the girl answered in a singing voice which surprised Akimov by its resemblance to the South Russian way of speaking.

"The *gamle* man," Akimov said scratching his ear. "Who's he? We'll have to send for the interpreter."

"That means 'the old man' in Norwegian," Tulyakov explained with a hardly perceptible smile.

"So you know Norwegian, do you?" Akimov said with angry mockery. "Clever, aren't you? But you would have been cleverer if you hadn't taken the *gamle* man's boat!"

He beckoned to the girl and led her to the rocks where the boat lay. At first she seemed afraid, but when she saw the boat she gave a cry of joy.

Akimov turned to Tulyakov. "Next time you want to borrow anything, ask the owner first. And give it back to him personally. Is that clear?"

---

* The old man is out at sea.—*Tr.*

"Yes."

"See that you do it."

They started back to the billet area. For a long time Akimov did not say anything. Then he turned to Tulyakov and said: "You'll be getting us into international complications and Molotov'll have to write and give explanations. And through whose fault? All through Chief Petty Officer Ilya Tulyakov's, born in 1920, member of the Y.C.L. Bad show, Tulyakov. Away with you."

Akimov was not quite sincere in reprimanding Tulyakov. In conscience he could not blame him. He'd taken the boat, of course, but after all he'd returned it exactly as he found it. He couldn't haul it into the old man's hut, so he'd left it in the water close by.

The mystery was cleared up a little later. Akimov was having dinner with his officers when Letyagin came in and was invited to share their meal. Then old Pedersen came hurrying into the dug-out.

He was in an exalted, joyful mood. His bright eyes, which before had been tragically motionless and full of reproach, were puckered up in comic fashion and twinkling cheerfully. His attitude towards Akimov and the other officers was quite unconstrained and even had a touch of fatherly condescendence. He treated them as just ordinary young men, friends of his, although they wore the uniform of another country. This unexpected manifestation of deep but subdued gratitude greatly amused and touched Akimov.

He told Letyagin to ask about the boat and this was what he found out. The land along the fjord was divided into small lots, each belonging to different owners. Tulyakov had taken the boat from the tiny plot belonging to the old fisherman and had left it near another man's. Pedersen quite seriously explained that he had no right to go and look for his boat on someone else's land, and that not every owner would allow a man to enter his property.

"Yes, that's the way it is here," said Letyagin.

And indeed the land there, even on the islands, was divided into tiny properties, many of which had a notice, *Adgang forbudt*—"No entrance." Each of the owners had his own private path leading to the miserable little piece of land where he lived surrounded by stunted birches, dwarf cabbage beds and a strip of meagre grassland. And all round was the no-man's land of the barren plateau where the Lapps' reindeer were let loose to pasture for the whole summer.

The officers invited the old fisherman to have dinner with them, and he showed an excellent appetite for everything, including the black rye bread, about which there was a curious rumour among the Norwegians that it was baked in butter. "Well, well!" exclaimed Akimov astounded at the news. "What things people imagine!"

His words were confirmed by the old man, who very cautiously asked whether it was true that the Russians were going to stay there for good, conquer the whole of Norway and confiscate all the boats, land, woods, cattle and women. "Only the young ones, though, I suppose?" he asked, with a cunning wink of his pale blue eyes.

"All those are Quisling yarns," Letyagin said in a depressed tone after a long and angry talk with the old man. "That's what you get from Vikkola and his like." He looked at Martynov, who was quite excited, and warned him: "But that's none of our business, Comrade Lieutenant-Commander; it's a matter for the Norwegian Government to look after. That's what instructions from Moscow say."

The old man soon finished his meal and left. It was not long before Letyagin rose too. His reccy men came for him.

"Going far?" Akimov asked.

"Be back in a couple of days."

"Come straight to us then, eh?"

"Righto, thanks. Fine chaps you've got here."

Akimov saw him off.

"Good-bye, Akimov," Letyagin said. The reccy men were waiting for him in a dark cluster outside.

"Good luck!"

Letyagin was already going, when he suddenly turned back and said to Akimov, "Remember Badeikin, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Of course, you were on his ship. His sub-chaser was sunk landing an assault party and he was seriously wounded."

"Was he?" said Akimov.

The reccy officer and his men disappeared round a turn in the road. Akimov suddenly felt an overwhelming weariness, akin to illness. All he wanted was to lie down and sleep as soon as possible, and not just for an hour, but for a long, long time so that when he woke up he would have forgotten many things, one of which was the ceaseless rumble which still echoed in his ears. As he went past the houses, he saw that the Norwegians were already settling in. Doors were opening and shutting as the people brought back their goods and chattels which had been hidden or buried.

"Good," he murmured, "that's fine!"

He heard Lieutenant Ventsov, who was battalion duty officer, calling him.

"A wireless message!"

"Got a light?"

The lieutenant flashed his torch.

Akimov read the message, said, "That's that," and entered the dug-out. Lieutenant Kozlovsky was asleep, sitting with his guitar in his hands. Matyukhin was dozing in the corner. When he heard the battalion commander come in, he jumped up, smiled a contented smile, made a broad gesture to show what he had collected to furnish the dug-out and the ground sheets draping the walls, and asked, "Well, Comrade Commander, is it as good as your Mayboroda used to do it?"

"I suppose it is," Akimov answered, not even honouring it with a glance. He took out his map and started studying the route laid down in the wireless message. It was across the tundra to the Tanaelv, a long river flowing into Tana Fjord. There was not a town or village on the road.

Matyukhin observed the battalion commander, sighed, rolled up his blankets with an air of resignation and started to gather up his things.

"Where's Martynov?" Akimov asked.

He was told that Martynov had gone to the companies to see whether the men were asleep.

"Asleep!" he cried angrily. "They've had enough sleep!"

He swore and, without turning round, shouted to Ventsov, who was standing in the doorway, to order a stand-to.

Akimov stood motionless with his ears strained as the sound of Ventsov's steps faded in the distance. Kozlovsky was snoring peacefully and he just hated to waken him. The silence lasted for another few minutes and then the whole neighbourhood echoed with shouts, the stamp of feet and the clatter of weapons. Akimov remained where he was for another five minutes and at last heard the shouted order, "Fall in!" Martynov came in, as erect, neat and orderly as usual. Without saying a word he went up to the table, read the message and sat down. Kozlovsky entered, shivering with cold after being awakened and hurriedly packed his guitar away.

Akimov listened attentively for a while and then went out.

"'Ten-shun!" ordered Ventsov. Then he reported in his young strong voice, loud and smart in the dark, that the battalion was formed up as ordered.

The battalion commander went along the column. The well-known eyes of his men looked him calmly and confidently in the face. And the sight of them inspired Akimov himself with a courageous, almost cheerful, mood.

3

The blue twilight encompassed the battalion on all sides. The hazy northern lights seemed poised calmly overhead. Birds screeched among the rocks.

The cold wind blowing in the men's faces dispelled their sleepiness. The piercing cries of the birds and all the unwonted atmosphere awoke a strange feeling of alarm in the marines. In minutes like those it did the man good to look at the massive silhouette of the battalion commander marching with a swinging gait in front of them, looking back now and again so that they saw his broad, half-mocking, inspiringly calm face. Sometimes he would speak and then the men nearest to him smiled and those at the back smiled too, although they had not heard what he said.

"That's the stuff!" Yegorov muttered approvingly.

The wireless message had ordered the battalion to place itself temporarily at the orders of the commander of a rifle division, representatives of which were to meet it at a cross-roads south of Kirkenes, near some houses which were still intact. When the marines arrived, however, they found nobody there. Akimov placed guards and ordered the men to make themselves comfortable in the houses while waiting. Then he sent two men to bring Minevich's company while he, Martynov and Matyukhin knocked at the door of the first house, beside which the Norwegian flag was flying.

The small house was full of Norwegian men, women and children, some lying on mattresses, some sitting on chairs, others on the bare floor along the walls. It looked more like a caravanserai than a house. When Akimov entered, children's eyes were riveted on him from all sides. He stopped in embarrassment, almost making up his mind that it was no use taking up room where there was already intolerably little. But a tall thin man with stubbly cheeks rose from the table and went towards him, blinking with excitement. He started speaking and the children's eyes seemed to sparkle from all over the room while those of the women melted in smiles and the men uttered dignified grunts.

Three chairs were soon placed for Akimov and his companions near a long table on which carbide lamps were burning. The master of the house went on speaking and though the Russians could not understand him, as he well knew, the expression on his face was so eloquent in its radiance that Akimov, Martynov and Matyukhin smiled too and felt their situation rather awkward but very pleasant.

The host was a miner, as he was eager to explain to his guests. But it was not until his youngest daughter—a clever-looking girl called Öse—thought of showing them a photograph of him in his miner's clothes with his pick in his hand that he was at last understood. Then the Russians heartily shook hands with him, and he began to tell them something, supplementing his words with gestures and rolling his eyes despondently when he saw they did not understand him. The only words they could make out were Communist and *Tysker*—the latter being the Norwegian for Germans. But that little was sufficient.

"Is he a Communist?" Martynov asked hesitatingly, pointing at the master of the house.

"Ja, ja, ja!" the whole room answered.

There could be no doubt about it: that was no trick to win favour with the Russian officers. Here was none of the cringing respect that Akimov had noticed in the demeanour and words of the Kirkenes burgomaster, Olsen, the schoolmaster, or the rich Vikkola.

Martynov was perhaps as excited as the Norwegians. He took his Party card out of his pocket, poked himself in the chest and then did the same to Akimov and said, "See, Communists. Me, him."

The master of the house cautiously took the little booklet, showed it to his wife, his children and everybody else, and then gave it back to Martynov. When the latter had put it away the miner unexpectedly embraced first him and then Akimov. Then he went hesitantly to Matyukhin, but stopped short of him and asked, "Communist?"

"No," said Matyukhin, shaking his head in confusion. "I'm non-Party."

The miner was surprised, for he thought everybody in Russia was a Communist, but Akimov burst into laughter and pushed him towards Matyukhin. The Norwegian laughed in his turn, and embraced Matyukhin too.

A girl, whose name, as she told the Russians with a curtsy, was Ingrid, ran into the next room and came back with some flat meal cakes called *knekkebröd*, which the people there ate instead of bread. After a good deal of consideration Matyukhin took out of his kit-bag a bottle he had been saving up. Glasses appeared on the table, and a drop was poured into each. Everybody rose. The Norwegians, their eyes fixed on those of the Russians, put their glasses to their hearts, said "*Skål*" and drank slowly. The Russians said "*na zdorovye*" and drank it down in one gulp.

The master of the house, sometimes speaking, sometimes just smiling, clasped his hands in despair when he was unable to make himself understood. He told how hard it had been for Communists there, how the owners of the Sud Varanger Works lorded it over the whole region as if it had been their private domain and how the yellowest of unions held sway in the works. He, a simple miner, he said, had taken in a number of families, whose homes had been burned; he had done so because he was a Communist and was obliged to help those who were victims of misfortune. But not everybody shared that sentiment of solidarity, and many homeless families had to live literally in the street.

Martynov listened attentively, shaking his head; he realized that the things their host was speaking of were very important and he was wild at himself for not being able to understand him. "Believe me, we must learn Norwegian," he whispered to Akimov.

One of the women wound up a gramophone. Perhaps they intended to have a folk dance, but just then the door burst open and a colonel in a tall astrakhan hat and a leather coat rushed in, making the floorboards creak under his weight. He was the representative from the rifle division that Akimov was waiting for. He looked around in astonishment at the colourful gathering but did not pass any remark. Then he went up to Akimov and said sharply the single word, "Come."

There was an uneasy look in his eyes, and Akimov immediately rose and followed him to the door. But there he stood rooted to the ground. The record that had just been put on struck a chord in his mind. More than that, it seemed somehow part of himself, so full it was of radiant intimate reminiscences.

"Anitra's Dance, by Grieg," he said and the words seemed to come not from his lips but from Anichka's. He saw quite clearly the dug-out lined with willow switches and everything that he associated with that music.

The Norwegians were filled with astonished delight when they heard those familiar words drop from the lips of the Russian officer. *"Ja, ja, ja!"* the whole room at once shouted with enthusiasm.

"Just a minute," Akimov said, and despite the colonel's impatient look he would not move until the record was over. He wondered how a melody so dear to him was played in such a far-off country, and only when the sounds died away did he remember that the composer was a Norwegian, a son of that country and probably the pride of his people.

Akimov left the little Norwegian house at last and went with the colonel to the green staff car waiting by the cross-roads. Both officers took out their maps.

"The situation's complicated," the colonel said. "The Germans have started a counter-attack in the Polmak area on the Tanaelv. It may be a very serious counter-stroke. Large enemy concentrations have been detected on the west bank of the river. I'll give you ten lorries to take at least part of your battalion there but I can't give you any more for the time being. The others will have to go on foot. Go into action immediately."

"I understand," Akimov answered. "Everything will be done." He was silent for a while and then he said, smiling, "When you hear music that you know, it's like meeting an old friend."

"Eh? What did you say?" asked the colonel, whose thoughts were far from music. Akimov did not answer. He went with his swinging stride to his battalion, which was already formed up on the road.

The first company got on the lorries which had just driven up, and Akimov jumped on to the running board of the first one and shouted to the short oil-smeared driver, "Off we go! Step on it!" The column drove off.

"Switch your headlights on, what are you afraid of?" said Akimov, getting into the seat next to the driver.

"We won't go far this way, but we've got to go quickly. The Germans have got something up their sleeve."

The lorries raced along the stony road between the rocks. All the time Akimov could hear the strange graceful melody. It sounded no longer sad but challenging and fascinating, even somewhat alarming, and it brought back to his mind familiar scenes. The rugged land around him seemed to lose its harshness and become attractive. The cries of the birds overhead and the blue twilight no longer jarred on him. For a moment he almost forgot the war and thought he was just travelling through unknown interesting places about which he would have to tell Anichka soon. He must try not to forget anything, to remember every detail, the shrill cries of the birds soaring over the cliffs along the road, the thankful faces of the Norwegian men, women and children, the red Norwegian flag with its blue cross fluttering from all the flagstaffs as a sign of liberation. And so many other things.

Soon shell-bursts were heard and a fire broke out ahead, its glare setting off the dark silhouette of a village and a long strip of wood in the distance. That must be the wood stretching along the Tanaelv valley, Akimov thought, for behind the trees he could guess the outline of the cliff winding along the bed of the river.

On a cliff to the left of the road dark figures could be seen surveying the west through binoculars, while at the foot of the cliff signalmen were dragging drums of telephone wire.

Akimov stopped the column, jumped out, went up the cliff and said to the officers, "Well, what's going on? I'm Akimov. Arrived with Marine Corps."

They all looked round and you could see the joy on their faces. One, probably the senior among them, pointed to the fire.

"There's your direction, Comrade Akimov," he said. "We'll give you a mortar company." Then he shouted, "Hey, mortars!"

The mortar lieutenant came, saluted Akimov and said, "I've to report to you."

After a talk with the officers, Akimov went down the cliff and shouted, "Debus there!"

The marines were out of the lorries and formed up on the road in a second. Then they marched off, Akimov in front with Kozlovsky and the mortar lieutenant. Akimov looked sideways at the mortar lieutenant and said, "Don't fire your mortars without an order from me. No use smashing up houses for nothing."

A few German shells burst not far off; they had apparently come from the western bank of the river.

"Spread the men out in a line," Akimov ordered, turning to Kozlovsky. "Off we go."

The sailors crept over the rocks, their figures sharply detached against the light sky.

"What's your name?" Akimov asked the mortar officer.

"Seliverstov, Comrade Major."

"Well, Comrade Seliverstov, don't fire yet. Stay by me. What we've got to do is to drive the Germans out of the village without giving them time to blow the houses up. If you're allowed to fire those mortars, you'll blow them to pieces yourself, even if your intentions are good. So don't be angry."

"I'm not angry," said Seliverstov, embarrassed.

They went forward slowly. A runner came and reported that the Germans were retreating without haste and setting fire to the houses. The inhabitants were fleeing into the woods. On the river there was a flotilla of motor launches. Artillery was firing from the western bank.

"You must attack!" Akimov shouted. "What are you hanging around for? Waiting for them to do their stuff and run away?"

From the boulder on which he had climbed he had a view of the wooded opposite bank, on which flashes of artillery were seen now here, now there.

"I'll make you pay for Badeikin," he muttered. "I'll teach you to set fire to houses!"

He rushed down the cliff towards the wood and soon reached the first trees. It was dark there. Between the trunks he could see the shining ribbon of the river skirting the wood. Farther to the left, in a curve on the river, were a lot of small motor craft, apparently Norwegian, commandeered from the whole length of the river.

"Forward, sailors!" Akimov shouted.

There was a clatter of machine-guns, tommy guns and rifles all along the bank. Then a shout, "Hurrah!"

"Seliverstov," said Akimov, "it's your turn now. Give those boats a taste."

Seliverstov said a few words to the soldiers accompanying him and raised his binoculars to his eyes. Bullets whistled through the trees. The motors of the boats started to throb. Beautiful coloured flares shot up.

Akimov ran down to the river. Now and then he brushed against the fir trees and the roughness of the trunks made him tingle with pleasure.

"That you, Tulyakov?" he asked a man at a machine-gun.

"Yes, Comrade Commander."

"Let 'em have it, let 'em have it! What's that man Seliverstov doing? Not a bad river. Pretty. Rapids. Doesn't freeze either. Mountain river. Move over to the left along the bank."

The men went slowly along the left bank towards the village. The mortars opened fire at last, scattering the German boats on the river. Everything around was rumbling and trembling. Bullets whistled sinisterly among the trees.

"Comrade Commander! Comrade Commander! Where is he?"

"He was here just now."

"Comrade Commander!"

There was no answer. Matyukhin prodded among the trees, looking for Akimov.

"Tulyakov! Tulyakov!" Matyukhin shouted, bending down over the machine-gunner. "Answer me!"

"What?"

"Where's the battalion commander?"

"He's there," Tulyakov said. He turned away from his machine-gun and blinked with amazement: the battalion commander was not there.

Matyukhin saw Akimov lying at the river's edge. One hand, large and sunburnt, was hanging in the water, the fingers forming four little waterfalls.

"A-a-ah!" screamed Matyukhin, like a woman.

Everybody heard that scream above the roar of the artillery and the mortars, the splashing of the water and the shouts of the Germans. Figures came running up, first Ventsov's men from the right, then Martynov and Kozlovsky from the left. They picked Akimov up and carried him into the village. Somebody tried to drag Matyukhin away but he snapped: "Don't touch me. Leave me alone. I don't want to live."

Akimov heard Matyukhin's shout, but he thought it was the noise of the rapids or the cry of a night bird, something proceeding not from man but from nature. He came to himself for a second while they were carrying him and thought that Martynov and Matyukhin and somebody else had been sitting by his bed night after night and he wanted to tell them it was all right, they should go and get a sleep, for they certainly needed one. He said that, he thought, and they went away, just vanished, and now he was thirsty and there was nobody to give him a drink, for he had ordered them all away from his bed. He fancied he was lying in his bunk on the ship and it was rocking and rocking, more and more and more, and his naked heart was bumping against something that was sharp and blunt at the same time. The rocking became so violent and threw his heart with such force against that sharp yet blunt object that the pain swelled and swelled till he could bear it no longer. That couldn't go on, he thought, it had to stop; he couldn't torture his heart like that,—it wasn't his. Perhaps in that instant he thought of Anichka. He couldn't think of her name, he couldn't remember her face or even who she was, but in his head there was a spot of light and joy in which she and everything he loved in life were united. And it was that spot of light and joy that his heart, trembling with pain and struggle, belonged to.

He shuddered and then lay still.

"It's over," said Martynov, and he tore open the front of his tunic as sailors do when going into an attack.

They carried the battalion commander cautiously as if he had been alive, for no one could believe that such a massive powerful body, such a brave restless heart, just now so full of life, had ceased to exist. It was strange to see him lying motionless, as if he had always lain like that and did not wish to be in any other position. Two other men who had been killed were carried behind him, two young sailors, Ivanov and Goryushkin. Their death would also rent with sorrow and despair the hearts of those who had known them as Akimov's friends had known him.

Near the Lapp settlement, in the midst of poor tents made of reindeer skins stretched on poles, Martynov ordered a halt. It soon began to snow heavily. The Lapps harnessed their beasts to the sleighs on which the killed had been laid. The reindeer reared their antlers and warily pricked up their ears. The Lapps walked beside the sleighs, small frightened men. The smell of them was the smell of fish. Their head-gear was a tall pointed cap of many colours like a clown's.

The reccy detachment appeared, nobody knew from where. Letyagin, who was in front, came and asked where Commander Akimov was. The only answer he got was a gesture in the direction of the sleigh. The red scar on his forehead turned pale.

They went on, Letyagin walking beside the sleigh, awkward though it was, for now and then he tripped up in the snow. But he went on beside it, for it seemed to him that it was necessary and important to look at Akimov's face under the ground sheet.

Kovalevsky had at last found the apples and had brought them to Kirkenes, where he was waiting for Akimov. The apples had kept well—good Antonovkas they were. When he heard what had happened he went limp and wept. With tears in his eyes he went back to Pechenga, to a naval aviation unit which had been awarded the Red Banner and about which he wished to write an article.

The Norwegian authorities allotted a place for a cemetery at the foot of Høibutmuen Plateau. That was where the Russians who had been herded to Norway and tortured to death there by the Nazis were buried. The bodies of the officers and men from Kirkenes units and ships who had been killed in the last days' fighting were brought there. The Norwegians set their flags at half-mast. Dressed in black, they came on skis or on foot over the freshly fallen snow to the new cemetery. Soviet military and naval units marched there too.

Letyagin and Martynov went side by side, both of them in silence. The sharp words of command seemed to have a peculiar dull and mournful echo amid the rocks and cliffs. Heavier and thicker fell the snow.

As he looked at the tense faces of the Norwegian men and the weeping women, Letyagin wondered whether they understood that the events of the last few days had given them a place in world history; whether they realized that the names of Jarfjordboten, Elvenes, Björnevatn, Høibutmuen and other places on the edge of Europe, the province of Finnmark, which had been slaked with Russian blood, were henceforth historical and not just geographical facts.

Letyagin contemplated the motionless faces of the soldiers and thought that the presence of any foreign army, be it even allied, on any soil is a burden for the population, but that no army had ever tried to be less of a burden than the Soviet Army; no army had observed such voluntary self-restraint or shown such an example of disinterestedness and friendship as the Soviet Army.

Filled with these grave but inspiring thoughts, Letyagin at last resolved to look at the face of Akimov. It was calm and handsome. Letyagin felt that Akimov was going to open his eyes and say something. What could he say? His deep pealing voice would say, probably to the accompaniment of a sarcastic laugh: "Enough of this! Why prolong the agony! Bury me and have done with it."

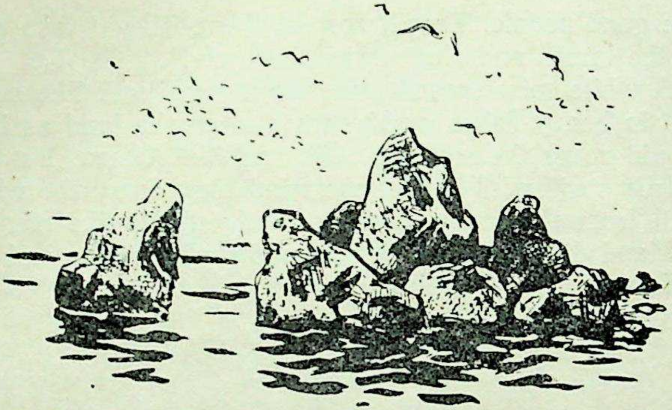
The silly thought almost brought tears to Letyagin's eyes. He pressed his lips together and looked sideways at Martynov. He was standing there as white as a sheet.

The farewell salvo rang out. The women wept and wailed as all women do all over the world. An old fisherman shouted in Norwegian, "We shall never forget you!" Two girls who looked strangely like each other sobbed aloud, and all was over.

When all the others had dispersed, Letyagin and Martynov stood for about half an hour near the wooden obelisk with the red star on it.

"We should take him back home," Letyagin said. "It's better to be buried in your native soil." But after thinking a while he changed his mind. "No, the Norwayers are good people. They'll respect them. They'll take care of the tombs and clear away the snow."

A white mist spread over Varanger Fjord. The snow fell in heavy flakes on the sea and on the land as if it would cover the sea, the cliffs and the plateau. But the waves swallowed it and the wind blew away the white pall from the rocky summits, and only in the marshy lowland did the snow remain undisturbed, deep and indifferent.



CHAPTER NINE

THE LIFE OF THE DEAD

1

WHEN, IN 1949, she had finished her studies at the Medical Institute in Moscow and become a doctor, Anna Alexandrovna Belozyorova settled with her daughter in the town of Tula, where she had been sent to work in a hospital. One of the many reasons which rejoiced her there was that her father motored out to see her every Sunday. This habit of the professor's was shamelessly exploited by the hospital, and he smilingly consented to it, giving consultations and even occasionally performing a particularly serious operation.

Professor Belozyorov had long ago resigned himself to what had happened to Anichka. When he thought it all over he came to the conclusion that had anybody told him that this had befallen other people he would certainly have accused the father of being a heartless stupid man.

As time passed his harshness appalled him more and more. He swallowed his pride and admitted to himself that he was by no means a model of paternal sagacity and morality as he had formerly so smugly considered himself to be.

He confessed this sincerely in a letter to Anichka in autumn 1944, and when later he returned from the front he did all he could to efface his guilt. Anichka's daughter, Katya, had in him a loving grandfather.

One day he met his old friend Verstovsky, who had been promoted to general, and when he heard that he was in the Department of Foreign Relations of the Ministry of the Armed Forces he asked him to get information on the grave of Anichka's husband in Norway.

"His name is Pavel Gordeyevich Akimov," he said. "He was a commander in the navy. He is buried at ... just a minute, I'll look it up ... Høibutmuen in Norway."

As Verstovsky wrote all this down in his notebook he suddenly gave a start. "Akimov, did you say? Let me see. Can it be that battalion commander? A tall, obstinate, jolly fellow. He had been in the navy too."

"Did you know him?"

"Of course, I did! Yes, it's him all right! Anichka was in the same regiment. So he was killed, was he? What a pity! Such a fine officer!"

The professor knew that it was not Verstovsky's habit to show enthusiasm, and he was touched and flattered by his high opinion of the man whom he had once considered to blame for Anichka's unhappiness.

Verstovsky promised to obtain the required information and soon rang up the professor to ask for a meeting with him.

"Yes," he told Professor Belozyorov, "he is the very man I thought, a very good officer. I see he was called back to the navy. I even remember there was talk about that in my presence that time at Orsha. The Northern Fleet sailors remember him quite well. As a matter of fact he is a man whom you can't easily forget. Lieutenant-Commander Letyagin, who is in Naval General Headquarters, can tell you the exact circumstances of his death. I have asked our Military Attaché in Norway to find out about his grave. I told him Akimov was related to you and me, and was Anichka's husband. He promised to make enquiries."

Anichka was now twenty-eight years old and in the full bloom of her beauty. She had turned out to be a talented doctor and, being equable and simple in her relations with people, she was loved by both patients and colleagues.

Soon she was transferred, on her father's request, to a clinic in the capital. Her success there would have been more highly appreciated had she not been the daughter of a distinguished professor. As it was, her skill and ability were attributed to the leadership of her father and to some kind of heredity, as if a calling and delicacy of perception were hereditary.

But she did not mind this, for she felt that she was beginning to mature professionally and sensed that she already had the beginnings of the astonishing ability that her father and other great surgeons had displayed.

Her life seemed calm and unobtrusive, all devoted to her work and her daughter. It was difficult to read on her unruffled features the despair that had once tortured her and sometimes seized her even now.

She had spent two years in a state of uninterrupted and unrelenting misery. She got on very well in her studies, but her student years seemed to pass without touching her. She felt herself borne on a wave which held her up and carried her forward without any effort on her part. That wave might have been duty, obligation, love of her country, motherly love or something else, but it had never let Anichka sink.

But whatever Anichka did she was always wondering: How can I read a book when he is dead? How can I eat and drink when he is no longer here? How can I put on my gloves when I have him no more?" And yet she read books, ate and drank, and put on gloves, just as Aunt Nadya did all those things although her son had not come back from the war.

This sometimes made Anichka furious with herself. She thought she must be a wretched creature to cling on to life so pitiably. She did not want to live because Akimov was dead and she thought a real woman could not live in such circumstances. And yet she lived and did all she had to do for herself, Katya, her father and the society in which she lived.

She took to reading everything she could find about Norway, and even learnt Norwegian, which was not very difficult for her because of its resemblance to German. As she read of that small, hard-working, honest people she found her consolation in the thought that it was precisely the fact that that people was small, hard-working and honest that justified the death of Pavel Akimov.

2

One day she decided to go to Kovrov to see Pavel's parents. It was during the summer of 1946. She got a train in the evening and arrived there next morning. She went along Abelman Street, then down Bazaar Street past the old stone shops and over the bridge, and there she was in Zarechnaya Slobodka. Here she saw small wooden houses lost in verdure.

She had no difficulty in finding the house she was looking for, in spite of its having nothing to distinguish it from its neighbours. An old woman was sitting on a bench outside it. Anichka immediately recognized her as Pavel's mother by some elusive resemblance she had to her son. It seemed strange that such a small, neat old woman whose person radiated kindness should have had a son like the massive Pavel. And it seemed strange, too, that she should be sitting on that bench when he was dead.

"How do you do, Maria Kapitonovna?" said Anichka. "I am Anna Belozyorova. I wrote you a letter."

The old lady embraced her, full of emotion, and led her into the house without a word.

Then, when her feelings had calmed down somewhat, she asked: "Why haven't you brought my little grandchild? Or perhaps you have?"

"No, I haven't, but I shall bring her next time."

"Well, let me see what you're like," said the old woman, fixing her sad eyes upon Anichka.

The neighbours heard of Anichka's arrival and the door kept opening to admit people inquisitive to have a look at Pavel Akimov's widow. Most of them were weavers, men and women getting on in years, and some of them brought children with them. They all greeted Anichka with a certain solemnity. They knew that she was the daughter of a distinguished doctor and general, but that was not what roused their curiosity. Some of them had sons who were generals, Party workers, managers and influential people, and they felt themselves too near authority and in fact too much invested with authority themselves in the state of workers and peasants, to attach much importance to that. The real reason was that they had known Pavel Akimov well and loved him, he had been one of the strongest and nicest boys in Zarechnaya Slobodka, and then a well-known shock-worker and activist.

Some of the old women there had even had designs on him for their own daughters and they were interested to see who it was that Pavel had chosen as his wife, for he was a young man who was not so easy to please in that respect. They sat down for a chat, had some tea with cherry jam, and then went away thinking what a good choice he had made.

Soon Varya, Akimov's younger sister, who was not yet married, came back from work. She was a school-teacher and taught in the lower classes of No. 1 School, the very one Pavel himself had attended and which before that had been a gymnasium. She was so like Pavel that Anichka gave a start when she saw her. She embraced her with great warmth, and Varya burst into tears.

At last Pavel's father, Gordei Petrovich, who still worked as a foreman at the weaving mills, came home from work. He was a tall man with lively eyes under bushy eyebrows, especially the right one, which stood erect over his eye in a perky, almost blustering way. He came in and greeted Anichka without even knowing who she was.

"Well, here I am," he said. "How are you, young people? And who is the beauty I see there? I've never seen her in Kovrov."

The silence with which his words were received put him on his guard. Then he saw Pavel's photo on the table and the smile on his large face gave place to an expression of sorrow.

"So that's it, is it?" he said. Then he asked: "And how's the grand-daughter?"

"Fine," answered Anichka. "I'll bring her to see you another time."

Next day Anichka went to have a look at the town. Varya and her father showed her the big excavator works where Pavel had worked, the old man telling all he could remember about it. He could still recall the time when it was just a workshop where everything was done by hand and the light was provided by petrol lamps. There was so much smoke in the smithy then, he said, that you almost suffocated. When the smith could no longer stand it he would run out, lie in the snow for a while and then go back to his job.

Now the building was large and had big windows. In the yard Anichka saw new Kovrovets excavators, painted all red just like trams.

The old man showed her Mount Shyrina, the place where demonstrations and underground meetings were held. In the old days fist fights used to be held there.

It was a town of metal workers and weavers, one of those many Russian towns which had spared neither their strength nor their blood for the revolution and socialism. When the Left Socialist-Revolutionary mutiny broke out Kovrov sent the 250th Infantry Regiment and the local Bolsheviks led by Abelman, chairman of the Soviet and the secretary of the Uyezd Party Committee, to help the Moscow workers. Abelman was killed and one of the Moscow gates was named after him. The Kovrov Bolsheviks and workers sent men to suppress the Murom White Guard revolt too, and put an end to the kulak mutinies in the Kluchnikov and Belkov areas. Then they set to work with great stubbornness to restore their works and factories. The first excavator was built in 1931, and serial output was started two years later.

"And in the Great Patriotic War ..." the old man paused and then added in a dull voice, "the people of Kovrov gave all they could."

3

We could end the story of Pavel Akimov here and go on to tell about the joys and sorrows of people who lived after him. Indeed we should like to write Finis and lay down our pen and, though leaving our hero with regret, give ourselves up to other thoughts.

But unfortunately we cannot do so.

In August 1951 men came with crowbars and spades, explosives and bulldozers to the Russian military cemeteries in Norway; they blasted open the graves and threw into pits the bodies of men who, had they been alive, would have put to flight much larger numbers of desecrators. They levelled out the earth with heavy rollers, sweeping away and flattening in the soil the flowers placed there by the pious hands of local inhabitants.

One of the cemeteries thus profaned was the graveyard in Finnmark where Akimov's body lay. On the mountain plateau they started to build an aerodrome from which bombers were to attack the country which had been the first to send troops to liberate Norway and the first to withdraw its army after the liberation.

Men who live on the work of others wanted to prepare a war against the peoples, and as the memory of those recent events was an obstacle to their plans, they decided to efface it from the earth. The dead were in their way, so they made up their minds to kill them a second time.

The news of these misdeeds was not immediately made public; it was sifted through numerous diplomatic and other channels and checked over and over again; it was hard to believe such shocking things could be true.

When General Verstovsky was informed by the Military Attaché in Norway of what had happened, he was staggered and horrified. What affected him most was that the body of Akimov had been buried there.

He went to see Professor Belozyorov and in the privacy of his study told him all that he had heard. Shock drained the colour from the professor's face. Both men sat in the gathering darkness, unable to make up their minds whether to tell Anichka. From the next room came peals of childish laughter and hushed voices.

"She'll hear about it anyhow," Verstovsky said. "It's bound to be made known soon."

"What shall we do then? Shall we tell her?"

"She should marry again."

"She doesn't wish to."

When it was quite dark, Anichka knocked at the door and asked in a low voice, "Father, are you asleep?"

Neither of the generals had the courage to answer, and Anichka went back to her room.

"Even the dead are in their way," Verstovsky said dejectedly.

The professor fingered his grey moustache, bewildered and grieved that such things should happen on our earth. His expression was grim, stony. You can stop all the clocks on the earth, he thought, but that will not prevent time from marching on. And the destruction of the heroes' graves far away on the northern edge of Europe is like stopping tiny clocks that tick away quietly in the arctic night in the stupid hope of stopping time.

"We must tell her," he said suddenly, and he called Anichka.

Anichka listened to Verstovsky and then stood motionless. She was filled with surprise, horror and insult; she felt her confidence in humanity melt away. For an instant which seemed an age of horror she asked Akimov: "Why did you go there? What did you give your life for? Whom did you sacrifice your noble thoughts, your courage and your love for?"

But fortunately she did not remain long in that state of mind. She realized that the insult was not for her alone. It was an affront to the whole of humanity. Anichka understood that the human race is too noble to be confused with the hideous beast which preys upon it. She soon overcame her emotion and said in a voice that was almost calm, "He must inspire the enemy with as much terror now that he is dead as he did when he was alive." And she thought that his was an extraordinary destiny, that of living on after death.

Anichka wished her father and the general good night and went to her room.

The next day was the beginning of the school year. Little Katya, Pavel Akimov's daughter, was already seven years of age and this was to be her first day at school. Anichka ironed the child's white pinafore. There was no need to sprinkle water on it; it was wet enough with the tears, large like raindrops, that flowed from the eyes and the heart of the mother.

1952

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

55 ls